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Scuttlebutt: Stories

by

Terry L. Shamblin

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English of the State

University of New York, College at Brockport, in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

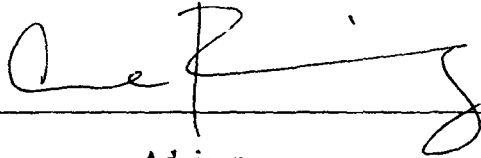
MASTER OF ARTS

2000

SCUTTLEBUTT: STORIES

by Terry L. Shamblin

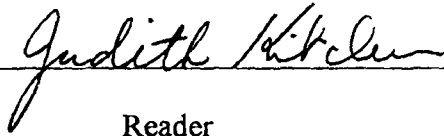
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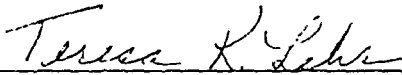
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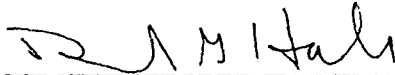
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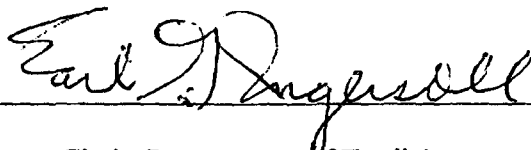
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Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Works Cited | 27 |
| Take That to the Bank | 31 |
| Scuttlebutt | 51 |
| Away from the Light | 73 |
| One of the Guys | 95 |
| Zero Visibility | 124 |
| RoxRocks | 149 |
| Enjoying the Ride | 171 |
| Perfect Posture | 192 |
| Rainbow Wings | 195 |
| Flights of Fancy | 218 |

Introduction

In 1982 Maxine Hairston heralded the emergence of a new paradigm in composition studies. This new paradigm is based on the premises that writing is a circular, recursive process, that all students can learn to write, and that writing teachers should be writers themselves (Hairston 13; Garrison 58). The widespread acceptance of these premises marked a paradigm shift in the teaching of writing. This paradigm shift, with its emphasis on invention, discovery, and other modes of rhetorical inquiry (Hairston 13), firmly allied the fields of composition and rhetoric, a pairing up that still exists today. In addition to rhetorical contributions, Hairston further urged that the teaching of writing should be "informed by other disciplines, especially cognitive psychology and linguistics" and "based on linguistic research and research into the composing process" (13).

Despite the fact that these beliefs as expressed by Hairston are strikingly similar to the present day beliefs held in the area of creative writing, no mention is made about the contributions of creative writing practices and pedagogy to this new writing paradigm. This lapse appears even more ironic when one considers that the process revolution in composition "drew on the work of 'real' writers ... in elaborating its theories" (Lardner 72). In addition, creative writing has been in existence as an academic discipline for over 120 years (Fenza 55), and the premise of MFA programs [is] that you *can* teach people to write" (Connor 15, author's own emphasis), the exact same premise of composition research.

Another similarity between creative writing and the composition paradigm is that most writers of short fiction today are also professors of writing themselves. For

example, George Saunders and Junot Diaz teach at Syracuse University, Lorrie Moore at the University of Wisconsin, and Amy Hempel at Bennington College. Anne Panning teaches at Brockport College, Thorn Jones at the Iowa Writers Program, and Pinckney Benedict at Hollins University, to name just a few. The Associated Writing Programs, formed in 1967 expressly for the students and faculty of the discipline of creative writing, asserts that "the craft and pedagogy of writers who teach should be continually honed by their experience as practicing artists" (Penza 54). Similarly, an "increasingly popular academic genre-narratives about teaching," published recently by compositionists, rhetoricians, and creative writers alike (Lewiecki-Wilson 97), suggests that writing teachers are writers regardless of their fields of study.

Other basic premises of composition, rhetoric, and creative writing are quite similar or even identical, but the vocabularies-are strikingly different. What is referred to as a "zero draft" (Murray 86) in composition is called a "shitty first draft" in creative writing (Lamott 21). Advice to "show rather than tell" (Burke and Tinsley 66) is given as "be specific and explicit" in composition and was given by Aristotle as the necessity to produce "witnesses and documents" to rhetoricians (Garrison 63).

The impetus for the process revolution in composition was the 1972 article by Donald Murray, "Teach Writing as Process Not Product," but it is based on the "concepts forming the canon of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, "and delivery" (Lunsford and Glenn 397). Creative writers also talk about their processes but less openly because, in the words of Debra Spark, "we're assuming too much when we talk about our own process. We're assuming we're real writers, and as soon as we do that, we're bound to be punished for hubris." Because of this feeling that "we're all baby

writers" (14), creative writers tend to talk about writing in terms of craft. Nevertheless, craft can be defined as 'the faint gray area of overlap between genius and rhetoric, [and while]...one cannot be taught to be a genius, one can learn to imitate some of the techniques in which geniuses are expert" (Mayers 84).

Despite these and many other similarities, there has never been a firm alliance within these closely related academic areas. In fact, a strong dichotomy has emerged, pitting the two disciplines against each other. "For all that the two fields might have in common, we also recognize significant rifts separating composition and creative writing. Often, each has separate faculty ... student clientele... conferences and journals" (Lardner 77). Further evidence of this rift can be seen as recently as 1999 when the Modern Language Association published what is, in essence, an "indictment of writing programs," an article entitled, "Creative Writing in the Academy" by David Radovich (Fenza 54).

A growing number of professionals, however, have been calling for an end to this "false dichotomy" between such inter-related disciplines (Cain 94). Ted Lardner asserts that the two disciplines could learn much from each other (72), and Wendy Bishop laments that "seldom discussed are the basic commonalities of writing a poem and writing an essay" (qtd. in Kalamaras 78). Tim Mayers suggests that the relation of poetic craft to rhetoric ... is a potentially productive direction, which would bring creative writing and composition into much closer proximity" (88), and Donald Murray proclaims, "I do not agree with the educational segregation of functional and imaginative writing, creative and noncreative writing" (88).

Like many modern writers, scholars, and teachers, just a few of whom are listed above, I truly feel that all disciplines, especially those dealing with the study and practice of language and writing, should directly inform each other. Certainly in creating this collection of short fiction, I drew on my education in other areas. For example, my background in psychology helped me to create more complex, believable characters. The study of sociolinguistics and grammar influenced decisions regarding syntax, diction, dialect, and dialogue. Even basic mathematics and statistics played parts in determining the final arrangement of the works, and, of course, years of reading literature and practicing writing of all types also helped to shape the final product.

I also believe, as do many others, that my background in rhetoric and composition has strongly influenced my writing of creative works. Therefore, I will draw on the works of many writers and scholars, regardless of their academic credentials or labels, in order to discuss the process of writing in general, and, specifically, the writing of the fictional works in this collection. Wendy Bishop, by highlighting her academic background and creative writing activities, tries to "make disciplinary boundaries fluid and permeable by making visible the cross-currents that influenced her" (Lewiecki-Wilson 98), and that, in all fairness to myself and the varied influences on my writing, is what I must do.

Although poet Heather McHugh says that writing "goes beyond rhetorical exercise" (qtd. in Mayers 87), it is still a rhetorical exercise, highly persuasive in nature. A writer must convince his or her audience to suspend their disbelief and accept fictional worlds and the characters in them. One way to accomplish this acceptance can be to use the rhetorical concerns of persuasion. For example, the study of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*,

the underlying elements of rhetoric as established by Aristotle (Lunsford and Glenn 394), has made my fiction more effective.

Of the ten stories in this collection, five of them have first-person narrators, and my search for believable, reliable narrators was enhanced by *ethos*, the establishing of credentials or authority for these characters. The narrator of "Rainbow Wings," for example, is qualified to talk about childbirth and motherhood because she already has four children. Roxanne, in "Rox Rocks," has the knowledge and experience to talk about the drug scene in her small city, and, although the narrator of "One of the Guys" simply reports what he sees on a daily basis, his youth, his initial innocence, and his inability to correctly interpret the men's actions allow the readers to take what he says at face value.

The use of *pathos*, or connecting with the emotions of the reader, is accomplished in "Flights of Fancy" by the very situation of friends dealing with the death of a friend. In "Take That to the Bank," emotions are heightened by the uncomfortable feeling of being present at the unraveling of a lifelong friendship, and one cannot help but pity the narrator of "Rainbow Wings" because of her difficult pregnancy and unsupportive mother and husband.

Finally, the application of *logos*, or the appeal to reason or logic, is, in one form or another, also present in all stories. Any actions taken by a character have to be logical extensions of the character traits the author has given him or her. For example, in "One of the Guys," the narrator begins to echo the sexist attitudes and remarks of the men by whom he is surrounded on a daily basis, a natural progression of the conditioning he unknowingly receives. Similarly, the generous nature of the narrator as revealed

throughout "Take That to the Bank" makes her final action of allowing Carol to "win" logical behavior for her.

Other rhetorical devices are also used in my stories, especially in regard to language use. Richard Latham states that "shapes, either sound patterns or sight patterns ... make a lot of difference in prose" because they carry with them "their own kind of illogical persuasion." He calls this "capitalization on the chance resemblances of language" tacit persuasion patterns. These patterns please and persuade audiences more than their logical content merits (123-24). Some examples of these tacit persuasion patterns can be seen in the stories of this collection. A variation of *polyptoton*, the repetition of a word with the same root but a different ending, can be seen in "Away from the Light." Throughout that story I use various forms of or synonyms for the words "blind" and "sight." Some examples are "blind date," "reflection," "focus," "look," "anopsia," "typhlosis," "amaurosis," "vision," "illusion," "see," "light," and "mirror."

Another tacit persuasion pattern that is present in my works is *chiasmus*, the inverting of words and / or meanings that form an "X." This pattern of antithesis and the x-shape formed by it "suggest the fundamental reciprocity of human ethics" and provide reassurance against "the force to separate experience into two mutually exclusive camps" (Latham 126-27). An example of *chiasmus* can be seen in "Enjoying the Ride." Bobby and Louise live a simple life. By some standards their existence would be considered substandard, but Bobby reassures Louise by saying, "People wanted furniture when all they needed was somewhere to set their asses. They wanted fancy clothes when all they needed was something to cover their nakedness.... they wanted more than they had and spent more than they had so that they really had nothing at all."

Furthermore, the repetition of the key words in that passage form an aphorism, which contains a "paradoxical electricity" wherein "equal length [equals] equal entity." The fact that Bobby's beliefs of what people need receive more space than what people want elevates him not only to equal ground with the others in their town but also perhaps to higher ground, possessing greater wisdom. The similar opening patterns, repetition of "they wanted," is called *anaphora* and can be used to build a climax that causes the audience to believe what is said (Latham 129-30). After this expression of Bobby's beliefs, a description of how they live is given and deemed perfectly acceptable because of the tacit persuasion patterns at work.

Other stories contain these and other rhetorical devices as well. For example, rhetorical repetition is used at the end of "Rainbow Wings" in the 'I' phrases: "I pushed/"I pushed," "I fought," "I called," "I saw." This repetition builds to a climax wherein the last line stands out because it does not start with the repeated phrase.

Latham also cites lists as containing tacit persuasion patterns (135), and listing is one of my favorite devices to use in my fiction. "Enjoying the Ride" contains lists of building materials, freezer contents, and animal skins. "Flights of Fancy" contains lists of what each character brings camping with her, and these lists also help to further characterize each woman. The short story, "Perfect Posture," is practically all lists. These lists, given from mother to daughter, consist of all the things the mother feels a woman should be and do and know. This listing is so complete, and made me feel so inadequate and sad at the same time, that I almost called the story "Repression Lessons."

Another way that rhetoric and composition has affected my creative writing is in the study of the aims and modes of discourse. The primary purpose of the works in this

collection is, of course, to contribute to literature, and, according to discourse theory, literature is signal or language oriented and intended to entertain an audience (McCleary 96). As such, the language and the craft of using language become the primary concerns, as noted through the use of figurative language and tacit persuasion patterns in the individual stories. However, awareness of how to produce works in the other aims of discourse in regard to their rhetorical concerns is also invaluable to creating fictional works. This knowledge is important because, although the primary aim of fiction is purported to be entertainment, the use of the other aims of discourse is often present also.

For example, informative discourse is used in "Away from the Light" in the form of medical sections interspersed throughout the story. These sections serve to inform the reader about the procedure of laser eye surgery, but they also add elements of tension and fear to complement the actual story. Also, expressive discourse is used in many of the first-person stories in order that the reader might be- able to infer how the narrator is feeling. Even exploratory discourse can be used-in fiction. For example, in "Rox Rocks," Roxanne explores the issue of her mother raising her son, and the reader becomes aware of the reasoning behind her distancing herself from the child. She also explores the issue of her cancer, and the isolation of her previous treatments is the rationalized reason behind her present neglect of her health. While the audience might not agree with her decisions or her actions, there are sufficient motivations revealed through expressive and exploratory discourses that one cannot judge her too harshly.

An understanding of the modes of discourse-description, classification, narration, and evaluation (McCleary 94)-is also imperative to the creation of effective fiction. Modes are dimensions of subjects or "ways of viewing subjects as static or

dynamic, abstract or concrete" (97). Because description and classification are static, meaning they stop the action of the story, I try to avoid including big blocks of either mode in my stories. It has proven far more effective to intersperse bits and pieces of concrete description with action or dialogue in order to retain the flow of the story.

Similarly, because classifications and evaluations are abstract in nature, I use them sparingly. If they are given at all in the course of a story, it is a character doing the evaluating or classifying in order not to break-out of the reality of the story. Example of characters engaging in evaluation and classification can be seen in "Take That to the Bank." The narrator classifies her friend Carol as a cheapskate while Carol evaluates the narrator's behavior as irresponsible. Ultimately, the reader is left with the responsibility for the classification and evaluation of these characters and their actions.

The modes of discourse are also helpful as organizational devices for written discourses (McCleary 97). For example, the narrative of the eye surgery and its ultimate failure serve as a framework around which "Away from the Light" is organized, and, as noted above, its dynamic properties also propel the story forward. Similarly, although the unexpected blizzard in "Zero Visibility" stops the characters in their paths, it is also a dynamic organizing device for the story. How the characters, trapped together in a small house, evaluate the lives and choices of the other characters, and ultimately their own, is what moves the story along when the characters are technically incapable of moving themselves.

Now, I will discuss my own writing process, which has evolved over the years. When I first started writing fiction, I had the uncomfortable feeling that I didn't know what I was doing; I was just stumbling along with ideas and thoughts and trying to turn

them into stories. The advice of Flannery O'Connor gave me some much-needed reassurance. She said, "The only way to learn to write stories is to write them, and then try to discover what you have done" (qtd. in Murray 102). That's exactly what I did. "Writing is learned by writing and rewriting-and in no other way" (Garrison 56), and through writing I have come up with a process of writing short fiction that I call my own even though it may, in parts, be similar to the processes of other 'writers.

Aristotle's canon of rhetoric has evolved into the five steps of the writing process: prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing; it's often shortened to three steps: prewriting, writing, and rewriting (Murray 86). It's hard for me to discuss these steps in order because I don't complete them in a neat and orderly fashion. I often don't know what I want to say until I have a nearly completed draft. Thankfully, according to recent research, this recursive writing process is normal and natural. Donald Murray says that the "stages of the process overlap.... Writers move back and forth through all stages of the writing process as they search for meaning and then attempt to clarify it" (86). Tim Mayers states that it's time to help student writers "discover that meanings can be made to fit words, not just the other way around" (87), and many writers now believe that 'to produce [written works] that say something, you have to allow language to lead you to meaning" (Murray 88).

These recent attitudes appear to indicate that the days of the John Irving school of fiction writing are over. John Irving's advice to writers was to "know the story-the whole story... before you begin the story." Otherwise, he said "what kind of a storyteller are you? Just an ordinary kind ... making it up as you go along, like a common liar" (qtd. in Safire and Safir 233).

I disagree with Irving and side with Allan Gurganus's claim that "lying is always the best sort of fictional research" (5). E.L. Doctorow believes that "writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go" (qtd in Satire and Safir 29), and E.M. Forster said, "How do I know what think until I see what I say?" (qtd. in Murray 101) Even George Saunders doesn't know where he's going when he starts to write, "approaching fiction ... with no particular destination in mind" (Larimer 34). Like Doctorow and Saunders, I have no idea where a story will end up when I start to write it, and, like Gurganus, if I don't know a fact, nine times out of ten, I'll make one up. I agree with Greg Garrett:

Unless I am going to write about characters exactly like myself, at some point I have to begin making things up. From there it is simply a question of degree.... Writers draw on experience, imagination, and empathy, and the last two can remedy a shortfall in the first. ("Writing" 33)

Leonard Bernstein says "inspiration is wonderful when it happens, but the writer must develop an approach for the rest of the time" (qtd. in Safire and Safir 125). I have found that the wait for inspiration is just too long, so I write even when I can think of nothing to say. Like Debra Spark, Anne Lamott, and Lorrie Moore, I take constant notes for later possible use (Spark 26; Lamott 97, 133). What do these notes say? For the story, "Enjoying the Ride," there were three notes. The first read, "It's actually somebody's job to go around and scrape up the road pizza." The second said, "Her husband left her with a leaky roof." The third said, "He leans so far back that it looks like he's walking downhill." I didn't write these notes with the intention of putting them together in the same story. I didn't even write them at the same time; in fact, the first

note was written a good two years before the other two. Nevertheless, they ended up together while I sat at my desk looking through notes, writing, and hoping-just a little bit-for some inspiration.

I think of these notes as nuggets that I can mine for story possibilities. The way I do that is with a Jot of prewriting exercises. Freewriting and brainstorming seem to be the most effective prewriting activities for me, and I revert to these methods many times throughout the writing of a story. Often, when I'm stuck in the middle of a story, I'll write down everything I know about a character and then think about what a person like that would do in a certain situation. Sometimes I manage to dig up a story, and other times the pan comes up empty. For example, I have never had a close friend die, but I've seen enough people go through that experience that I could effectively imagine the characters' reactions; therefore, "Flights of Fancy" became a story from an idea, observations, and a poem I'd written several years before I wrote the story.

On the other hand, I tried to write a story about a man released from jail, who now works in a cheese factory and takes care of his aging grandmother. Unfortunately, I lacked the knowledge, experience, and insight (empathy?) to put these elements together into an effective story.

Of course, other writers have had influences on what kinds of stories I choose to write. Anne Panning and Annie Proulx influenced me to become more regional in my writing, and Lorrie Moore and George Saunders encouraged even darker humor from me, two aspects of my work, which will be further discussed below. Junot Diaz influenced me not to use quotation marks for the dialogue in "Scuttlebutt."

The stories of Thorn Jones gave me a kind of permission to add an extremely visceral quality to my stories. In a world where women's bodies are often viewed as public commodities, I wanted to show, in fiction, that the reality is often not so pretty. For example, the supposed beauty of pregnant women, along with the desire many men feel to have a house full of children and an always-pregnant wife, are immediately turned around in the opening scene of "Rainbow Wings," which shows the puke, piss, and shit that these wives deal with on a daily basis. Similarly, "Rox Rocks" takes place in a world of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but a beautiful body is cause for loneliness and all the major characters deal with their own disabilities or crippling illnesses on a daily basis.

For the prewriting and writing stages of my writing process, I have discovered that I need absolute quiet because this is the most difficult and challenging part of the process for me. I can edit and proofread anytime, anywhere. However, to begin to write, to actually create a fictional world, I need to be entirely free from distractions. Only then can I be productive.

Once I've managed to find enough space and quiet time to get the words down on paper and I have a rough idea of the story, then I mostly work in sections, circling back and forth between revising, writing, prewriting, adding and eliminating information, and editing. For me; it's true what John Gregory Brown says: "The hard part is making up the story; the fun part is changing the words around" (qtd. in Garrett "Writers").

Revision is the most important stage of the writing process, and most of the time I "work not by writing but rewriting" (Garrison 56). Revision moves beyond editing concerns and truly makes or breaks a piece of writing. Revision is so much more than checking spelling and punctuation. It is:

writing, rewriting, rereading, reviewing, rethinking, rearranging, repairing, reconstructing, reevaluating, editing, tightening, sharpening, pruning, polishing, punching up, amending, altering, eliminating, transposing, expanding, condensing, connecting, cohering, unifying, perfecting. (Smuin 9)

Donald Murray claims that "rewriting is the difference between the dilettante and the artist, the amateur and the professional" (85), and I agree. Revision is the stage where I spend the most time, the stage where the story truly, finally emerges.

Revision is also a time to check craft issues. I look at the ending and the beginning of the story to see if they logically connect. I see if my last lines are "a mixture of closure and openness, a combination of delicacy and boldness" (Burke and Tinsley 118). Most, if not all, of the endings in this collection are not the endings I used in the original drafts usually because the original endings were too overt. I eliminated a dead body from "Rainbow Wings," an incident of pedophilia from "Scuttlebutt," and a graphic final going blind scene for Karen in "Away from the Light." "Enjoying the Ride" has had four different endings and many more scenarios of what could have happened to Bobby.

During revision, I also check character motivation, and I make sure each character has some quality to make him or her stand out. For example, "One of the Guys" contains a lot of characters that hang out in the bars, so I give each one a specific trait in order to keep the readers from confusing them. Jake is fat and gives dimes to the narrator. Lloyd is thin and lives on a small farm. Roy is scarred from burns and lives in a room over the

Elmwood hotel. Charlie is the barkeep married to Mitts. Joe whistles, and Dad is, of course, Dad, seen through the eyes of the narrator from about two feet away.

During revision, I also try to make sure I have eliminated clichés and delivered fresh images. I strive to use figurative language to make connections between things that have no logical connection. In this way I can avoid "telling, teaching, or ordering, [instead seeking] to establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing" (Booth 496). These connections also serve to "catch the reader off guard" (Long 87). For example, Joe compares his sex organ to vegetables at the end of "One of the Guys." The narrator of "Rainbow Wings" says her body "felt as if it were a piece of paper someone had crinkled up and started on fire."

Finding these connections and delivering them in a fresh way is probably the most important part of revision because these comparisons elevate fiction from a good story to something that reaches across the individuality of the readers to show the similarities between them. This is the writer's job, as Michael McGregor sees it:

The writer must cultivate the ability to see the world around him [or her] in an individual way, to see the significant in the small, the connection in the disparate [and must experience the world] in such a way that allows one to understand the connections between things and ... find the significance in the experience. (28)

This striving for the "significant in the small" is also one of the trademarks of my work. During revision I always try to make sure I have included enough concrete detail in the stories. Frank D'Angelo states that "composing begins with a general idea, but the main process is one of filling in the details" (53), and I pay particular attention to small

details because "it is the commonplace and precisely described object or event that has the ability summon startling power" (McElmurray 211). For example, "an ant formation swarming all over the counter on an Australian-shaped puddle of Kool-Aid" is the small thing that sets Linda into a panic in "Scuttlebutt," and the mother in "Perfect Posture" worries about such tiny details as the cuticles on her daughter's fingernails. In this manner, my writing has a tendency toward the miniature.

Many of today's writers believe it is "the small things that will make you great" (Rios 262), and that certainly appears to be the case with Lorrie Moore. Her writing has these same miniaturist qualities, and the small details that she highlights make her stories that much more real. As Larry Dark says, "The truth, as always, is in the details" (1998 xvi). These truths are revealed through minute detail because "the miniature is always a reduction of and a paradigm for the large whole of which it is a part" (Connor 24). In addition, the use of the small and the specific to reach for something larger and with more implications may be how to achieve what Franz Kafka claims that fiction should do. He says that stories should "wake us up with a blow to the head.... [and] must be the axe for the frozen sea inside of us" (qtd. in Long 84).

I also try to fill in sensory details during revision. "While sight may be the ... dominant of the senses, the primitive taste and smell can often be more effective ... in a story" (Connor 25), so each story in this collection offers some sensory details in addition to sight. "Enjoying the Ride" is full of rain and water until, by the end, the reader feels saturated from reading it. "One of the Guys" contains odors, such as "stale beer, Carmen's perfume, and those white things you stick in toilets that smell worse than pee, so you don't smell the pee"-and that's just on the inside. The house in "Rainbow

Wings" smells like a "pork chop-Pine-Sol-Pledge cocktail with some perfume thrown in for good measure."

These small sensory details add much to the stories because it seems that the more specific and detailed a story is, the more universal it becomes, and "universality is what gives writing validity" (Phillips 19). The best "short stories ... though particular, shed light on the human condition in general" (Dark 1999 xvii). Making connections between things that have none, providing sensory imagery, and writing clearly and specifically all combine to move beyond the story on the page. "A great story ... is ... something that transcends" its subject matter (McGregor 28), and the way to do that is to write about a particular human being rather than to write about human beings in general. In this way, the specific becomes the universal with implications for others.

In addition to the miniaturism found in my stories, they also contain elements of both minimalism and maximalism:

Minimalism ...[the] literary movement of the 1980's ...[is] characterized by sparseness of story and a focus on blue collar workers, misfortunate family relationships, unhealthy lifestyles, and lonely individuals [while] maximalism is about vastness ... and vision.... The interior world is not implied.... [Writers] reach deep into the world ... and unflinchingly describe what is experienced. (McElmurray 210-13)

The subject matter of my stories definitely fits in with the definition of minimalism. I choose to tell the stories of people on the edges, the boundaries of society: drunks, drug addicts, disgruntled housewives, and junk collectors, for example. They also tend to be a little sparse in regard to the physical description of the characters themselves.

On the other hand, my works are definitely not characterized by an overall sparseness. All of the stories in this collection, with the exception of "Perfect Posture," are over twenty pages long. They contain unflinching description and many digressions, "one of the most profound and engaging parts of storytelling" (Gurganus 7). Therefore, although the subject matter of my stories indicates a form of minimalism, I truly believe that fiction can not be stripped down too much; the short story has got to have some degree of fleshing out. I can not claim to be either a maximalist or a minimalist writer. Like all of the other boundaries noted above, "in the end the boundaries between minimalism and maximalist are permeable" (McElmurray 217), and somewhere in between is where I feel my work must be situated.

After revising and editing, I try to receive feedback from several people, and then I usually end up revising some more. Feedback can be very useful, especially when a reader can help me with my biggest problem area: a lack of subtlety because of tendency to overwrite. Sometimes I have a friend of mine read a draft, and every time she bursts out laughing, I make a note to eliminate that passage. This method worked extremely well for "Enjoying the Ride" because the passages my friend laughed at were the same ones that my writing professor said went too far in describing their "hard-luck-*Grapes of Wrath* lives:" pulling teeth out with vice grips and having the goat die and rot in the yard, to name just two.

On the other hand, there are also times when I have to trust myself and ignore advice. For example, I can't listen to my husband because he loves everything I write, and I can't listen to the advice of people who are closed-minded or contaminated by a t.v.-mentality. Many readers "seem to be embracing a fallacy: that writers should reproduce

the world as we know it" (Warner 44), but the world we know has been corrupted by television's reality programming and its manipulation of the media. Debra Spark claims that "in contemporary society, so much that is worthless claims our attention." As a result, readers "don't always know how to evaluate what [they] see" (22). Readers of this mindset can be lazy, expecting formulaic works with exciting action scenes, neatly packaged endings, and clear messages. If I've found that the person giving me feedback has completely different expectations of fiction than I have, or if he or she completely misreads my work and trashes it with extreme prejudice, I do what Anne Lamott suggests—I just "ditch the sucker" (169).

Once I find readers I'm comfortable with, I pick and choose which suggestions I'll follow and those I won't. Each reader is an individual and will, therefore, focus on something different in a story—"a reminder of what it means to offer texts to other intelligent human beings" (Warner 45). Each reader will come away with something different because "regardless of what the author had tried to give, we [readers] can judge only what we manage to take, and that will be as various as our various natures dictate" (Booth 83). As a result, I follow feedback advice only as I see fit; however, I'm not married to my words. I usually let the majority rule, and I follow my instincts the rest of the time. If I need to change something, I generally do.

It's hard to stop revising, and "internal revision can become eternal revision" (Murray 93). When I finally send a piece out in the hopes of publication--the final step in the writing process--is when I have to call a story done and move on to other stories. I try to make sure everything is clear, concrete, concise, and then I let it go because I "don't get to follow the story around. It must take care of itself in the world" (Rios 261). When

I send a piece out, I never explain to the editor what the story is about. Ultimately, "it is better by far to let the story speak for itself" (Curtis 54). When I get a rejection letter back, I send the work out again to somebody else. It was hard, at first, not to take rejection personally, but, according to everybody, rejection is normal and natural (Curtis 51; Garrett "Writers").

I do, however, feel that my stories are publishable and can appeal to a general audience. Although most of my protagonists are women, I don't think that the stories are exclusively for women. The humor that pervades much of my work makes it accessible to a larger audience. In addition, the dark nature of this humor situates my writing with many modern writers working today. Debra Spark says that "fiction fodder" consists of material that is both "heartbreaking and funny" (21). Larry Dark, referring specifically to Lorrie Moore, says that "humorous stories have become edgier and darker" (1998 xvii), and George Saunders has "an uncanny ability to find humor in improbable places" because what he finds funny is "the straight faces that people keep in spite of the fact that life is so full of suffering" (Larimer 36-37). I agree and try to create complex characters, who are happy in the face of tragedy and tragic despite the chances for happiness surrounding them.

Allan Gurganus says that a writer must "be able to move as fast as possible from the comic to the tragic and back again" (11), and that's what I try to do., I like to laugh, and I like to write stories that make people laugh even if the situation is inherently sad. While writing, I can be crying one minute and laughing the next. That's what I want my audience to do, even if it's to get them to like Bobby and his sense of humor in "Enjoying the Ride" just to take him away from them, or to give them happy, wonderful friends that

they want to laugh with but can't because of the foreknowledge that one of them is already dead in "plights of Fancy." If I can turn laughter into tears and back again, then I feel I've done my job.

Another reason my work is accessible to a larger audience is because it is very regional. Although, according to Joan Connor, "the term 'regional writing' is currently considered critically dismissive, [that classification] falsely diminishes the work [because] we are a regional country" (15). I pay particular attention to setting in my stories because I can't know what my characters are going to do until I know where they are. I agree with many regional writers that "place is character" (Russo 69) and "setting precedes character" (Connor 18) because I am, in large part, a product of place:

I grew up and continue to live in the small village of Oakfield, New York. Dairy farms, muck lands, and the Iroquois Wildlife Refuge surround Oakfield. It seems that "this place has a claim on me ... a claim that seems less perilous to acknowledge than to ignore" (McElmurray 79). As a result of this claim my environment has on me, my stories include the workings of small town life, including the pressure one feels to be involved in a community where everyone knows who is and who isn't doing what.

Linda in "Scuttlebutt" is entrenched in small town life, so concerned with what everyone will think and with following the rules that she continues in her miserable life, looking for happiness through community involvement and finding only more pressure. This story was chosen as the title story because it is a direct reflection of the small town gossip theme that runs through these stories. The lack of punctuation marks and the title itself indicate the importance of gossip. In this way, I can have my title do some work for me (Collins), reflecting the regional nature of the stories and highlighting this major

theme. Every story in this collection has a character concerned with gossip or with what others will think.

One of the most challenging tasks I had in writing such a regional collection was in trying to reveal the racism that is so prevalent in many of these small towns without making myself appear racist. In the end, I felt I had no choice but to use the horrible word, "nigger," in "Perfect Posture" and in "Enjoying the Ride." I tried to eliminate it, but no other word revealed these ingrained racist attitudes nearly as well. I felt as Mark Twain must have when he said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug" (qtd. in Garrison 67). In the end, I had to put aside my politically correct tendencies for the sake of the stories. The fact that this one word caused me so much heartache that I almost let the stories suffer for it shows that perhaps the "political correctness movement has done more harm than good" (Gurganus 6).

Other regional elements appear in these stories, such as migrant farm workers, animals killed on roads, and bars that serve as social centers. There are hills that have names, roads known only by numbers, cold May rains, and bitter winter storms. "People who cope with setting on a daily basis acquire a penchant for writing about it" (Connor 20), and this is "certainly true for me. Like Willa Cather, I try to "let [my] fiction grow out of the land beneath [my] feet" (qtd. in Satire and Safir 89). I truly feel that understanding and presenting the ideologies, occupations, entertainment, and gossip that occur in such places generates sympathy and complexity for characters who might otherwise be unsympathetic and stereotypical if removed from their environments. Similarly, when a character lives in a place where everybody thinks they know

everything about him or her, the influence of place becomes a defining factor in that character's life.

For example, in "Enjoying the Ride" Louise was raised in a racist, abusive home, and she becomes complex because she lives with a black man while still feeling distrustful towards Mexicans. We sympathize with her because she has overcome much of her upbringing in this racist community, yet we can still understand why she has a long way to go. Similarly, Roxanne seems incapable of change in "Rox Rocks" because she cares too much what is said about her and because she is so deeply entrenched in the life of the locals and the habits of a lifetime with them to realize that there are viable alternatives to her partying lifestyle. Like her friends, Roxanne becomes the quintessential "Batavia Rat," exhibiting what Joan Connor calls "environmental determinism, ... not 'I live here because I don't give a damn, but 'I don't give a damn because I live here' "(17).

Alan Gurganus gives the best summary of small town life and writers when he talks about his own small town. He writes:

It was a strange combination of being endlessly observed, and in exchange, having the right to endlessly observe other people. I think that a stifling provincial life is ideal training.... it is an endless source of inspiration ... and all the stories are waiting there. Like grapes, tales grow in bunches. (4)

My experiences in my small town have contributed much material for my stories; however, I have had to develop a sense of distance in order to turn that experience into stories. Flannery O'Connor states, "The writer's business is to contemplate experience,

not be merged in it" (qtd. in McGregor 28), and this premise is the same one that rhetoricians use when discussing literature:

Literature is one kind of written language in the role of spectator and presents, in a highly developed form, our social traffic in values.... The [writer], being freed from the practical and social demands made of a participant, uses that freedom to focus upon evaluating the possibilities of experience. (Britton et.al. 80)

Because literature represents social values, writers have a certain amount of responsibility. John Paul Sartre believed that "all literary work is an appeal ... [and] if you open [that book], you assume responsibility for it"(qtd. in Booth 124), and that is true to some extent. Nevertheless, writers must still present their works in an ethical manner, with sensitivity and understanding. "We all use language to create-or destroy---communities, societies, worlds" (Lunsfor4 and Glenn 405), and writers must be constantly aware of this. They must somehow "root out the concerns, terrors, and secret hopes of their own generation ... [and make them] available to other people" (Gurganus 8).

Because literature makes use of strong images and "the mind thinks in images," writers provide a "psychological reality" for their readers (D'Angelo 40-41); therefore, writers must be diligent in wielding the power their craft, skill, and talent have given them. As a result, I felt it was my obligation not to include a story I had written about four Native American women because the reality I created for them was too far away from the "true reality" of life on the Tonawanda Indian Reservation. I didn't do any research, making up "facts" and even philosophical beliefs. It would have been

irresponsible of me to present such an incomplete image to my readers, thus misleading them and misrepresenting my Native American neighbors. That story, as it is, cannot do what literature is supposed to do, which is "provide us with an ability-that will allow further growth and adjustment as we encounter new realities" (Booth 495).

Fiction, particularly the short story, should provide us with more than entertainment. It should help us make sense of our experiences and avoid false promises (Gurganus 11). Writers of fiction should seek to identify with others by using their "writing to build a bridge" from our world to theirs (Warner 45). Writers should ask themselves "how is your pain related to mine, and how does what pleases you please me, and is it not true that we are really more similar than different?" (Gurganus 6) In this way, the works we create can "celebrate the things that link us, no matter what our race, gender, religion, [or] sexual orientation" (Garrett "Writing" 28).

In this collection I write from the perspectives of a young boy, a black man, a repressed mother, and a drug addict, but, in actuality, I write about fellow human beings who are like me and not like me. Robert Olen Butler says it is the "fundamental faith of the artist" to "leap across the apparent differences between people" in our search for universals (qtd. in Garrett "Writers"), and Momaday asserts that these universals "don't belong to any particular literature, not to any ethnic experience" (qtd. in Garrett "Writing" 33).

Because writing is first and foremost a process of discovery, I feel I can learn about other people, and myself as I write about them. As does Elsie Wiesel, "I write to understand as much as to be understood ... rebuilding with memories, with ruins, with moments of grace" (qtd. in Safire and Safir 64). These moments, these fleeting

connections are what give literature its power and beauty. This ability to reach others through writing is an awesome and complicated gift bestowed from countless influences. It is a gift I must give back in the form of this collection because "bridging the gap[s]"-- between people, between discourses, between disciplines--"is where literature should be going as fast as it can" (Gurganus 6).

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Take That to the Bank

We split the bill, not fifty-fifty, but according to how much each of us ate, plus eight percent for sales tax. I leave three dollars for a tip, and Carol leaves seventy-five cents, exactly ten percent of her bill. I drop another two dollars on the table as she leads the way out.

We're running on fumes, so we drive from Chary's Restaurant to the gas station next door, not an Exxon or Mobil or Hess, but a generic mom and pop .operation that offers gaping potholes next to the pumps and a savings of a penny a gallon.

It's my Turn to fill up the tank. "What if she won't let us stay with her?" I ask, handing her twenty dollars while she pumps the gas. "Josey's mom probably has family staying with her, what with the wedding and-all. If our parents were still there, we could stay with them, but I don't know about Josey's mom right now. She's probably going nuts with the arrangements."

"I wouldn't marry him if I were Josey," Carol says. "Do you realize there's a marriage penalty on your taxes? They charge you, for Christ's sake,-as if marriage alone isn't punishment enough."

"I don't know if I'd say that," I say.

"It's true," she says, then recites The Gospel According to Carol: "They get you coming and they get you going." Amen. "Buy a marriage license; pay for the J.P. or, God forbid, a church with all' the trimmings like Josey's wasting her money on." She points at me with her free hand. "It's all a racket, a conspiracy. Did you know that the poverty level for a single person is only a thousand dollars a year lower than for a married couple?"

"It's not like we have to worry about poverty levels." I live very comfortably. At least I think that's what it means when your husband says you don't have *to* work. Carol says I've copped out and bought into the dependency trap. My philosophy, she says, is get the man and the man will get you everything else.

I guess it could look like that to someone who makes as much as her husband and contributes exactly fifty percent of their household expenses. They have separate bank accounts, at separate banks. Separateness seems to be the theme of their marriage. They have separate friends, interests, and hobbies. They like different foods, so they buy and prepare separate meals and clean up their own messes, taking turns feeding the girls. They even do their own laundry because, Carol told me back when we still told each other secrets, she punched him in the face once when he ruined her new silk blouse in the dryer.

"Wow!" I'd said, amazed and horrified that she'd hit him over something so minor, and "Yes," I'd said, "I do realize how much silk costs." I told her how my husband and I never raised a hand to each other in anger. Carol rolled her eyes and said how symptomatic, how sad, that I felt grateful for not being beaten. I didn't bother to explain that's not what I meant.

"We all have to worry," she says; forecasting the coming doom. "We all could be wiped out at any time. Financially speaking, of course."

She rocks the car back and forth to squeeze in as much gas as possible.

"You know what they say," I say. "Two can live as cheaply as one."

She snorts. "That's what they want you to believe. Do you know how much it costs to go from being two to being one?"

"Not a clue." That information is strictly on a need to know basis.

"Uncontested, it's four hundred fifty-two dollars *and* twenty-five cents, to be exact," Carol says, being exact.

"I guess there's a substantial penalty for early withdrawal," I say in my best commercial announcer voice, but she fails to see the humor in it. It's not like I charge .her for laughing. Maybe I should offer to pay: a quarter per joke, a buck if it's dirty.

"It held \$22.50," she says, screwing on the gas cap.

I fish around in my pocket, unwad the bills, and hand her a crinkled five. "Keep the change," I say and hop in the car.

She comes back and hands me the two fifty. "You know what your problem is?" she asks me, starting the car and pulling out. "You are an over tipper."

Apparently she has eyes in the back of her head, too.

"Well," I say, jerking back and forth from her manic shifting. "Let me give you a free tip. Loosen up already."

"Financially speaking?"

"No," I say, "*generally* speaking." I decide to change the subject. "How do you know how much it costs for a divorce?"

"Just a little comparison shopping. You know?" She gives a dime's worth of a snicker. It's something. I think. "The smaller the ad in the yellow pages, the cheaper the divorce costs."

"But do you want a divorce?"

She shrugs. "I can't afford a divorce. We're on a *budget*." She makes it sound like she is trapped on a desert island surrounded by piranha infested waters.

"Budget,, treadmill, diet, roller coaster. What do they all have in common? Give up? They're all things you can get on and off," I say. "Get it? Budgets? Elevators? The wagon? Men?" I'm looking for a laugh, but all I get is a look of horror and disbelief I have committed sacrilege against the Bottom Line God. Ego trips, high horses, my nerves.

"You just don't go off a budget." She says it like I'm some kind of social moron-you don't just get naked in public. "It's just not done, and you can take that to the bank," Carol says. She's off on mortgages, ten-year plans, contingency plans, diminishing returns, blah, blah, blah.

I wish just once that she would do something, or let me do something, without calculating the cost. That's why we're driving over six hundred miles to Josey's wedding instead of taking a plane. She said I couldn't afford the plane ticket, but I was more than willing to charge it-fly now, pay later. She won't let me waste money buying gifts, either, not even on Christmas or her girls' birthdays. She didn't speak to me for two weeks because I brought a teddy bear and some balloons to the hospital when her first tax write-off was born.

I pay the toll to get across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge: \$10.00. Carol doesn't offer to pay half, but does inform me that it works out to just over 45 cents per mile.

Sometimes I think, maybe we should cut our losses before we drain this relationship right into bankruptcy. Get out while we still have our shirts-metaphorically speaking, of course, because literally that might not be too pretty considering her six-dollar K-Mart bras that don't give the support of the name brands found at Kaufmans or Penneys. A sin, she tells me, an absolute sin to pay twenty-five bucks for a bra.

"Let's stop somewhere on the way and get the works," I say.

"The works?"

"You know, the works: hair, nails, facial, new dress, the works."

"Why would we want to spend all that money?" she asks.

"For the wedding, for the hell of it, for us--because we're worth it." I can't believe I've resorted to quoting commercials.

"But you don't have that kind of money," she says.

"I was going to charge it all," I say, catching her disapproving look. I know how she feels about the evils of credit card debt, but I shrug it off. "If I don't worry about it, why should you?" I decide to change tactics and go for vanity. "We should make an entrance you know, a triumphant return to Hicksville, New York, hometown girls make good, look great, act sophisticated, all that jazz."

"I am not going to buy a new dress when I already packed a perfectly good one."

"Are you sure it's not the same one you wore to Josey's first wedding?" Did I say that out loud?

"Very funny." I guess I did.

"It might be fun," I say. "We'd probably look ten years younger."

"Why should I bother? Who do I have to impress? I've already got a husband and a good job. Remember?"

"You could give old Jack a little thrill, for a change," I say. "It might help your situation."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? You don't know anything about my situation," she says. "I work fifty hours a week at the lab. Plus, I have to do all the housework, if I want it done right. I don't have time to sit around putting on make-up and fluffing my hair just to keep some man happy."

Like you do, she's thinking but not saying. I let it go, just like I let everything else go. Why should I explain to her how I like to look good for me, and having twice as much sex as she does is just a happy bonus? Hell, I'm sporting a hickey right now. She would never understand that I stay home because I'm not having some stranger raise my kids, that I'm not embarrassed by qualifying for the earned income credit or by owning only one car. I consistently ignore little snipes like "how can you afford that on your income?" and "see our new couch?" and "they're hiring at Denny's."

I usually laugh off the Denny's thing because that's where we both worked to pay the rent on our college apartment. We went down to S.C.U. together, and the first year was a struggle to pay the bills, get all the schoolwork done, and have a good time, too. I managed the fun better than the work, so I don't think Carol was that upset when I left to get married in our second year. She replaced me with three other roommates, cutting her share of expenses by 75%. Maybe that's where it started, but I'm not sure.

When we first met, money wasn't an issue because we were thirteen, and boys were the issue. Carol was new to town, the only child left at home of an army general and his mousy wife trying their hands at retirement in a rural farming town. Hoping to learn what the world offered outside of Allton, New York, Josey and I accepted the little army brat" into our group. We used to play "what if" for hours. "What if a boy tried to kiss you?" "What if he promised to marry you if you let him have his way with you?" Josey and I would giggle and blush and stammer out rules for kissing: no tongues until we were at least fifteen; no petting below the waist; and later, no rides without a raincoat. Carol, on the other hand, had to have more information to weigh her options. It would depend on the boy. Is he rich and handsome or young and desperate? Can I still take the pill or use back up method in addition to the rubber? Are we in a car or in a bed?

Josey did it first, with Stan Palucchi when she was sixteen and he was eighteen and eventually married him and divorced him when he developed a cocaine and beer habit and spent all their money and couldn't even get it up anymore, but all Carol and I knew at the time was how good she said it was and we had to try it ASAP. Within days of each other, we both ended up half-naked in the back seat of Billy Capwell's Mustang for ten sweaty minutes of awkward groping and panting and disappointment that accompany the first time. This initiation was followed by ten days of whispered slut gossip around the school and a screaming match between Carol and me about stealing each other's piece of ass. We finally decided not to let a little thing like a man come between our friendship again.

"I wonder whatever happened to Billy Capwell?" I ask her after we cross the rest of the bridge in silence and pull onto Interstate 85.

"He probably died of an STD," she says, the little slut."

I laugh, a little too loud, but what the hell. "He's probably a male stripper," I say, "working for tips stuffed down his underwear."

"I bet they make damn good money," she says.

"Probably," I say, and decide to sleep. "Wake me up when it's my Turn to drive," I say, grabbing the pillow out of the back seat and arranging it on the door.

"You can't drive," she says. "My insurance doesn't cover nonowners."

"Well, wake me if you get tired then."

"It's only 8:30," she says, but I close-my eyes anyway, thinking about our friendship or, lately, the lack of it. When we were teenagers, we used to talk on the phone for hours, but now we rarely call each other because Carol tries to keep our phone bills down. I offered to get a regional calling plan, but she said it's just a rip-off. It's only been twenty some years, but she's turned from a young girl into an old lady. We used to buy all our clothes together, but we don't go shopping anymore because I get so embarrassed. She always has something to return, and she always makes a scene. "I do not want store credit," she'll say real slowly, like she's talking to an idiot. "I want cash, greenbacks, real money." Usually they give in to her. Once they gave her all her money back for a meal plus some just to shut her up.

We used to go out to dinner about once a month with our husbands or our families, but I just can't do it anymore. If she's not complaining about the food or the service, she's complaining about the cost of the food being three times what you pay in the grocery store. I just can't sit still while her little girls sit there and pout while Carol orders them hot dogs with french fries and refuses to buy dessert. "I can get a whole half

gallon of ice cream for what they charge for one dish," she told the girls once, like they care about that when my boys are ordering steaks and cheesecakes and bottomless sodas while laughing and flirting with the waitresses. It's even worse when we go couples only because then it's her husband, Jack, flirting with the waitresses while she scrutinizes the bill.

I explained the tradition away in the only language she understands. I told her we could no longer afford to eat out. She looked relieved and said she'd always wondered how we could manage to do it on our "lower-middle-middle-middle-at-the-most-class income" anyway. I let it go, instead of saying that I thought a computer analyst and a lab technician could certainly afford to buy something special for their kids once in awhile.

I sleep until six. Carol looks like she's-been driving all night. "Why didn't you wake me up?" I ask.

"What for?" she says.

What for?

"Where are we?" I ask.

"We're on the Thruway just past Peterboro," she says.

"We should be home in a couple of hours," I say. "I hope there's a rest stop soon because I have to go pee." I start bouncing up and down on the seat.

"Home?" she says. "We've been living in the South for over fifteen years and you still consider Allton home? That's crazy."

"Not to me," I say. "We might even move back there after the boys are gone."

"Will you quit that bouncing?" she says. "You're shaking the whole car."

"I can't help it," I say. "I have to go really bad."

"You can't be serious about moving back to New York," she says. "You all could never afford the taxes. Just look at the Thruway here. Ten years after the tolls were supposed to stop, and they're still charging. It's such a racket."

"Pull over and I'll pee on their road," I say.

She laughs, but I've just decided I'm serious.

"I'm serious," I say. "I can't wait."

"You'll have to wait," she says, smiling.

"I swear to God, Carol, if you don't pull over right now, I'll--"

""You'll what?"

"I'll--" I'm mad because she never listens to me, because I need to stretch out and brush my teeth and get a cup of coffee, and because, damn it, I have to go. "I will piss right here in your car," I say.

"I don't think so." She sings every word. Sings!

"Oh yeah?" I undo my seat belt and lean back in the seat. "Watch this," I say and undo my jeans and start working them down over my hips. "Are you watching?" My clothes are stuck to me from sleeping in them all night, so I fall to my knees on the floorboard and work the jeans down to my knees. "I'm going to piss all over your fucking car," I say, trying to maneuver myself back up over the seat.

She slams on the brakes and pulls over, driving my head into the windshield. I have a sore spot, but not a bump.

"Thank you very much," I say and pull my pants up, leaving them unzipped. I get out, slam the door, and stomp away from the car. It's a wide open area with no trees,

bushes, or even any tall grass, but the hell with it. I pull my pants back down right there and stare at Carol the whole time I'm peeing and drip-drying. A semi drives by and honks his air horn, and people in their cars stare from the far lane.

I'm struck by the absurdity of it all; I've never been an exhibitionist before. Carol has never even seen me naked, and here I am showing my ass to the world. I laugh as I pull up my pants. I'm laughing out of control by the time I reach the car. "Did you see those people?" I ask Carol, laughing as I get in. "Did you see their faces?"

Carol laughs a little as she pulls back onto the highway, jerking me back and forth again with her shifting.

"I can't believe I peed in front of all those people," I say, between giggles.

"I can't either," she says, and I can't stop laughing because she's so serious. "I can't believe you were going to piss in my brand new car."

"Carol," I say, laughing harder, practically hyperventilating. "Brand new? Don't make me laugh. This car is at least two years old."

"That's still no reason to piss on it," she says.

My stomach hurts I'm laughing so hard. Carol even cracks a few smiles and a half a giggle because I keep repeating "piss on it."

"Pull yourself together," she says, pulling herself together. "Here's the rest stop."

I'm laughing even harder because I definitely could've held it to the rest stop.

A slow drive-by convinces us we can't stay with Josey's mom. Cars fill the driveway, and the house looks a lot smaller than we remember it. Everything in Allton looks the same and different. Wolfs farm is still on the outskirts of town and still smells

the same, but the old brick school across from it is gone, replaced by a gaudy steel and glass cube with two smaller cubes off to the side on odd angles like three giant dice thrown on the green grass. There's a new stoplight in town by the building that used to be the Laundromat but now has venetian blinds in the windows and a sign that says *Allton Village Offices*. The post office and Skip's Pizza still look the same, only smaller and duller, in need of a fresh coat of paint. The Dairy is closed down; faded newspapers cover the window, but the beat up telephone pole is still out front by the road. Every body in town has clipped that pole at one time or another. The gas station is in the same place, but now it's a Sugarcreek instead of Carl's Auto Shop. Carl died of throat cancer five or six years back. Allton Lanes, Restaurant, and Bar with its eight lanes and ten tables looks like a miniature memory with a new blacktop driveway. Kids are playing roller hockey on the smooth parking lot.

We drive right through to Newton, the next town over big enough to have a hotel. Actually, there are two: Mr. David's Motor Motel right next door to the Holiday Inn. Carol pulls into (surprise!) Mr. David's Emporium of Filth and Fleas.

"No way, Carol," I say. "Didn't you see that special report on cheap motels and filth? There are come stains on the blankets and the furniture. It was gross. They took an infrared camera in the rooms and you could see where all these guys had shot their wads. I'd rather spend the extra money to stay at a clean place."

"You don't have the extra money," she says, opening her door. "Besides, you can't believe everything you see on T.V."

I grab her sleeve to stop her. "I'm serious. I don't want to stay here. It's not safe. There was another special on about these places and high crime rates. We could get r--"

"Robbed?" she says at the same time I say, "raped."

We stay at the Holiday Inn in a cheap room with only one bed. It's not like we're used to sleeping alone, Carol says, but I wonder if she's telling the truth. She doesn't even change, just takes off her pants and bra and goes right to sleep with orders to wake her for brunch. I shower and change and go down to the lobby to call home collect. I tell my husband I would've had a better time with him and the three boys in our junky old car, and he tells me to fly home, just put it on the credit card and come home on a plane after the wedding tomorrow. I say I can't do that to Carol and decide to charge a swimming suit from the hotel boutique/beauty parlor/tanning salon and go to the hotel pool instead.

Yesterday's *Newton Daily News* sits on a lawn chair, so I grab it up and read it. It's still only about twenty pages, and it still costs fifty cents. I read the police blotter, but I don't recognize any of the names. I recognize a lot of the names on the back property tax list. I read in the obituary that old Mrs. Wolf died, was a member of the Allton Methodist church where she played the organ when I was little, had six kids, and was married to the late owner of Wolf Farms, Incorporated in Allton. It looked like the same farm to me, and here it was a corporation. The Newton Mall has gained approval to be turned into a medical complex, and the Allton High School will be holding dedication ceremonies for its new facilities at the same time as Josey's wedding tomorrow. House and apartment rents are double what we pay in North Carolina. Dear Abby advises

counseling over divorce or infidelity, and my horoscope says to be careful with my money. I laugh at that one and start to read the comics.

A big hairy man approaches me on my lounge chair. I smile because he's wearing brown Speedos, so at first I think he's naked. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asks.

I guess the suit was his originality limit. I shake my head no but keep smiling because he looks like that sasquach, big-foot creature that used to have a sitcom. Harry, I think his name was.

"Come on," he says, smiling a salesman's smile that says, "you did it first." He checks an imaginary watch and says, "It's all right because it's past noon."

"Is it really?" I ask, jumping up. "I'm late for brunch." I run through the locker room, grab my clothes, and take the elevator up to our room in my bathing suit.

Carol is up and dressed in flowered blue shorts and at-shirt that says *What if the hokey pokey is really what it's all about?* "Nice suit," she says to me. "We're meeting Josey for a late lunch at two, so you'd better get changed."

"Two?" I say. I'm hungry now. What about brunch?

"Yeah, two o'clock at the lanes," she says. "It'll be just like old times."

"We're going bowling?" I say. "The day before her wedding? We should take her somewhere nice like the--"

"Hey, it was her idea," Carol says and shrugs. "And it'll be a cheap lunch."

"Three bucks a game?" Carol says. "When we left, it was only a dollar."

"Things have changed," Josey says. "Just look at all of us." Josey is fifty pounds heavier, but she's never looked happier. Her skin is flushed and glowing, and her brown

eyes shine with excitement. In the bathroom, Carol chalks it up to not having any kids, but I think the fiancé probably deserves a little credit, too. We won't get to meet him until the wedding.

"Age has a way of sneaking up on you," Carol says.

"Oh my god," Josey says, 'not for Billy Capwell. You guys should see him. If I wasn't about to be happily married--"

"That loser's still around?" Carol asks.

"Oh, yeah, but he's no loser," Josey says. "I saw him yesterday. He's back in town for the dedication ceremony, staying at his mom's house. Alone. He's gorgeous, and he's newly divorced and his firm designed the new high school. You did know that he's an architect now, didn't you? Capwell, Cope, and Campbell-the three C's-that's his firm. He asked about you two."

"He did not!" I say.

"He did, too," Josey says. "Said you were his two favorite girls from school, and he's sorry he drove you out of town and kept you away from the reunions."

"Of all the nerve," Carol says. "I hope you put him in his place?"

"Actually, I invited him to the reception to see you two," Josey laughs. "He can hardly wait."

For the first time in years, Carol and I have a good time together. We spend our Friday night on a mission. We go to the beauty salon and get our hair cut and colored and styled. We go to the mall and buy new dresses right off the regular racks because we're too hot for clearance clothes. It takes awhile to find the dresses because while we

may be too hot for clearance, we're also too smart for dry-clean only. They're tight, they're black, and they're wrinkle-resistant. Who could ask for anything more? I talk Carol into buying high-high heels and control top underwear and control top pantyhose. We try everything on, and wear our new Miracle Bras right out of the store. My boobs are so high I think they're going to smother me. We go to the drugstore, and I buy hot wax for our legs and lips and bikini areas. Carol buys under eye wrinkle treatment firming cream, and I buy us alpha-hydroxy facial masks and lipstick the color of cranberries with toenail polish to match. We'll make that man sorry someone else got us.

Back in our room, we do the works, laughing the whole time. I tell Carol I'm a little jealous because she looks great with her new strawberry blonde head and curly lash mascara, and I think she blushes. We practice walking in our new shoes and smiling in our new lips and drink a bottle of wine that I ordered from room service. The wine goes straight from our empty stomachs to our heads, and we fall asleep watching a dirty movie with cotton between our cranberry toes.

The wedding is a small, afternoon affair at the Allton Methodist Church. Carol says it's the height of tacky to have your second wedding in the same church you had the first one, but I say there isn't much choice when the only other church is the Catholic one. There's a buffet reception immediately afterwards at the Polish Falcon over in Newton.

"Look at them look at us," Carol whispers to me after we put our cards in the wishing well and find seats.

"I know," I say back. "Isn't it great?"

"It's better than sex," she says.

"I don't know if I'd say that," I say. "How about it's better than winning the lottery?"

"I don't know if I'd say that," she says. She stands up and strikes a sexy pose. "But I'm definitely going to get my money's worth out of this get up." She leaves me at the table and goes to the bar.

We eat buffet style and drink lots of free drinks. We visit with people from school, some balding, some fat, some alcoholic, some exactly the same. They all tell us how great we look and make fun of our accents. We meet Josey's husband, and Carol says he flirted with her, but I didn't see it and Carol has had a lot to drink. We watch for Billy Capwell while we dance the funky chicken and the hokey pokey and slow dances with drunk old men who bow and kiss your hand and then your cheek when the dance is over. We watch for him while toasting the bride and groom and tapping our silverware against the glasses to make them kiss and debating whether or not we should try to catch the bouquet just to save the single women from themselves. And we watch: for him as we're helping Josey's mom and her sisters clean up the hall at 12:30 after everyone has left.

"I was going to sleep with him, you know," Carol says as we stack up the chairs.

"Who? Billy?" I ask, laughing. "Come on."

"I mean it. I-"

I laugh and assume the soap opera slut stance. "I would never let you have him," I say in a sexy voice. "Billy is mine."

"Girls, I can't thank you enough for all your help," Josey's mom says, approaching us with two handfuls of blue and green balloons. She looks old and tired as

she kisses us on our cheeks and tells us she can't tell us how wonderful it's been to see us. "You girls take these balloons with you," she says and shoos us out the door just like old times.

"Let me drive," I say, hobbling across the parking lot holding my shoes in one hand and the blue balloons in the other. "You drank way more than me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she says and cracks up laughing. "You think I'm drunk because I said I was going to fuck Billy, don't you? Don't you?"

"Well--"

"What? You think I wouldn't do it? You think I couldn't do it if I wanted to?" "I didn't--"

"What a waste of money all this shit was," she says gesturing to her outfit with her balloon hand so she's behind the green balloons for a few seconds. "I'm taking it all back tomorrow."

"You can't do that, "I say. "You look great. You should dress up like this for Jack."

"I don't think you should give me marital advice," she says, letting her balloons go so she can dig for her car keys in her purse. I'd tried to talk her into a small clutch handbag at the mall, but she said her old purse was fine.

"Should've bought the smaller purse," I say.

"You think you're so perfect," she says, shoving the purse at me. "You find the damn keys."

"Only if you hold my balloons," I say, trading her purse for the balloons.

She lets the blue balloons loose with a "Ha." I ignore her.

"How can you be so calm?" she asks me. "Do you think I couldn't have taken Billy away from you this time?"

"Carol, knock it off," I say, searching for the keys. "That's ancient history."

"Lucky you," she says. "A husband and an old boyfriend. Leave some men--"

"Get in the car," I tell her, unlocking the doors and getting in behind the wheel.

Like she had to lock her doors in Newton of all places. I start the car: I'm tempted to let her walk the mile to the hotel. She gets in, and I take off out of the parking lot, shifting extra hard for good measure.

"Oh, she can drive a stick, too," she says. "Did you learn on Billy's--"

"Just shut up, Carol," I say. "I am not letting something so stupid come between us. You need to sleep--"

"Don't tell me what I need," she says. "You don't know anything about me or about the real world. Things aren't like on t.v., you know. There is no happily ever after. There's only making do."

"Like you know anything about making do," I say.

"Your life is a joke," Carol says. "When are you going to realize that June Cleaver is dead?"

We pull into the Holiday Inn parking lot, and I throw the keys at her after I park the car. "I don't even know who you are," I say to her as I'm walking into the hotel.

I go to the hotel bar and order a screwdriver with Absolut. "I don't want any of the cheap shit," I say to the bartender. "Top shelf for me, all the way." I gulp it down and order another. The hairy man is back and headed my way.

"If it isn't the-late-for-brunch lady," he says to me, smiling. He motions to the stool next to me and I nod that it's okay if he sits down. He holds out his hand to me; his knuckles are hairy all the way down to his fingernails. "My name is John Campbell. Perhaps you've heard of my firm? Capwell, Cope, and Campbell? I'm the Campbell part. We're in town for--"

"The dedication at the Allton High School," I say, taking his hand and shaking it.

"That's right," he says, covering my hand with his other one. "You know the building?"

"I just rode by," I say. "I read about it in the paper, so I just--"

I see Carol come in the door of the bar and look around. I consider ducking, but I pull my hand out of his furry grip and wave it in the air. "That's my friend," I say as she makes her way over to us.

She touches my arm and says, "Hi, I--"

"Carol," I say, "I'd like you to meet John Campbell of Capwell, Cope, and Campbell. You know, the architects. John, this is my friend, Carol."

They shake hands and smile at each other.

"Well, if you two will excuse me," I say, finishing my drink and winking at Carol.

"I've got to go. It was nice meeting you, John. See you around, Carol."

Scuttlebutt

Linda Brown's son, Todd Jr., was in very real danger of receiving an F in the physical education section of his report card. Jack Fry, the gym teacher, a big man with a gray crew cut on his square head who was accustomed to children following his orders without question, informed her that seven-year-old Todd refused to skip. To add insult to injury, the boy had told the big guy that if he had a problem with that he could just talk to his dad, which Mr. Fry promptly did, calling both his parents in for a conference.

Linda and Todd Brown Sr. sat in the cramped office, surrounded by Mr. Fry's size thirteen shoes--basketball sneakers, golf shoes, baseball cleats, soccer cleats, and off in the far corner, combat boots. Linda, who prided herself on her children's exemplary behavior, who considered every one of their actions a direct reflection on her parenting skills, apologized profusely for her son's insubordination, for his non-compliance with state regulations that require he be able to skip two times around the gym. Surely, they would speak to him about this unfortunate situation right away.

Linda's husband, on the other hand, smiled and barely tried to hide that smile behind his chubby fist. His son wasn't allowed to skip, he told the gym teacher. Skipping turned little boys into faggots. What was he trying to do, Turn out an entire school full of effeminate homosexuals?

Mr. Fry, ten months from retiring from his second career, informed Mr. Brown that he was an ex-marine, a lean-green fighting machine, a man who ran miles in his combat boots, not those sissy ass sneakers like the recruits wear today. He told him he'd been a drill sergeant, teaching men how to be men for twenty years. He told him how he'd fought in Vietnam, ordered men to their deaths and they hadn't even questioned it, and now some snotty-nosed, little second-grader and his fat, tractor-selling father was going to tell him how to run his gym class? They were going to blemish his record of turning out the fittest elementary school kids in the entire state of New York? He didn't think so.

When Mr. Brown said tough shit, that's the way it is, Mr. Fry tried to reason with him. When Mr. Brown said it for what seemed like the tenth time, Mr. Fry dove across his desk and grabbed him by the shirt with his left hand. He landed a right hook under Mr. Brown's third chin, knocking his head back. Mr. Fry let go of his shirt, and the backward momentum of the punch sent Mr. Brown, chair and all, toppling over onto the floor and into unconsciousness.

Mr. Fry bent quickly over him and felt for a pulse while Linda checked for breath sounds. She looked at Mr. Fry over the body of her husband and thought he looked like he expected her to burst into hysterics at any second. Mr. Fry apologized over and over. He said he couldn't understand how he could lose control like that. Usually he was so levelheaded and professional, but he had a lot of pressure in his life and Mr. Brown had been so provoking, -but still that was no excuse. How could he be so out of control?

Linda, slapping Todd Sr. in the face until he regained consciousness, said that as a Girl Scout leader, she understood the stress he was under taking care of that many kids,

and as person, he understood how r husband could have that effect on people. Then she ordered Todd Sr, up off the floor, told Mr. Fry not to worry about anything, and dragged her husband out of the door, down the hall, and out of the school.

The next day, Todd Brown Jr. skipped twice around the gym well within the required time set forth by the state guidelines.

Mr. Fry sent Linda a dozen red roses. The note read, *Sorry and Thank-you. J.F.*

Linda Brown put the flowers in cut crystal vase and set them in the center of her dining room table next to the muffins he'd bought at Tops. At the Swallow Hollow Girl Scout Service Team Meeting held the following afternoon, all the women admired the flowers and complimented her on her thoughtful husband, on her beautiful home, and on the homemade blueberry muffins. How did she manage everything? they marveled. Her life was so orderly and organized. They hated to admit it, but they were a tiny bit jealous.

We'll talk more after the backpacking trip, Linda told them.

The other women were amazed that she was actually going to take her troop backpacking. What dedication to endure four weekend-long training sessions and the accelerated first aid, CPR, and rescue classes required just to take such a trip. The paperwork alone boggled the mind. Where did she find the volunteers to go with them? Where did she find the time?

Linda shrugged, smiled, made herself blush and said that their troop had buddied up with Barb Randall's troop from Wyoming County. Barb was a legend in the Western New York Girl Scout circle, having taken her troop on more camping trips and traveling vacations than any other leader in the area.

How exciting, the other women said. They begged for details about Barb, having never had the honor of meeting her personally.

Linda said she couldn't tell them much yet because Barb's schedule was so tightly packed that they'd only been able to plan over the phone, but she could already tell that she was an amazing woman. Barb's troop had plenty of adult an assistant leader and a volunteer father--to go around, so all Linda had to do was show up with her girls. Her oldest daughter, Shelly, 17, would be driving the station wagon with her sixteen-year-old, m, and the rest of the troop. Linda would be driving her van with little Todd, who they all called Tater Tot, and the backpacks.

I know, she said, isn't my husband great to let me take both cars?

After the women left, Linda retrieved all her dirty dishes out from under the sink and in the stove and stacked them on the counter so they'd be ready for her son when he got home from school. No stereotypical jobs for her kids: it was her daughters' job to mow the lawn and take care of the trash, and it was her son's job to help her wash the dishes every other day. Todd Sr. didn't like it, but too bad. She didn't have to do what he said. She would lead her daughters by example, as recommended in the Girl Guide manual for role models.

My son is not going to pal around with a bunch of girls anymore, Todd Sr. yelled when he realized Linda planned to take their son with her on her stupid little backpacking adventure. It was bad enough the kid had an official sit-upon made out of two flowered place mats and a troop name like Tater Tot.

It's not like you ever take him camping, Linda yelled back.

You're never around long enough, he said. You do everything for these kids who don't even belong to you.

Three of them do, and if you won't sign Todd up for Cub Scouts, he's going to continue hanging out with my girls.

There are too many perverts in with the Scouts, Todd Sr. said. Don't you read the papers?

You could be his leader, Linda told him as they loaded the van with the last of the gear. Then you would be responsible for him and make sure nothing happened to him, if you didn't have a heart attack on the trail.

Wait a minute, Todd Sr. said. You're taking both cars?

We'll be back on Sunday night, Linda laughed.

Linda and Shelly beeped as they backed out of the driveway.

He's jealous like a little kid who needs attention, Linda thought on the drive down to Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains. He's unsupportive of my community service efforts. Says they take too much time away from our family, but he's full of it. Did he come to the father-daughter sunrise breakfast our troop sponsored last week? No. Did he help make any of the two hundred bags of cotton candy the troop made and sold to raise money for their trip to Disneyland next year? No. Was he supportive when she allowed that teenage runaway to stay at their house last year? How was she supposed to know the girl would steal from them? He didn't care that just last week the president of the Mother's Club had come up and introduced herself, saying she'd heard good things about

Linda. The woman's husband is a lawyer, Linda thought, and it would be nice to have some friends like that instead of the families of the guys down at John Deere.

She briefly thought about divorce again, but how would that look? None of the other leaders were divorced. Neither were any of the members of the Community-School Organization, C.S.O. for short, which had replaced the PTA when it disbanded due to that terrible scandal over a missing fifty dollars. No, divorce wasn't the answer, but Linda also knew she couldn't change Todd anymore than she already had. Apparently he'd forgotten all about their plan to hike the Adirondack Trail after he retired. His idea of camping now involved an RV and a TV. How thoughtless he was not to share her interests or her involvement with their children. How dare he nearly involve her in a scandal by provoking that nice looking gym teacher? Then he'd wanted to embarrass her further by suing the man or even the school system. Luckily, she'd managed to talk him out of that, saying that everyone would know he was the one responsible for increased school taxes if he won a lawsuit! Then, they'd be social pariahs.

When I get back, Linda thought, I'll call Mr. Fry and thank him for the flowers. She wondered what his first name was-John? Jason? Jonas?-- and decided to find out and maybe invite him out for lunch--lunch in a secluded little restaurant out of town, better yet, out of the county, so no one they knew would see them.

The six girls and Tater Tot surrounded her as soon as they parked in the stone lot. Mrs. Brown, one of them whined, the other troop has a man with them.

He's an old man, too, cried her daughter, Kim.

Oh my god, Mom, Tater Tot said. It's my gym teacher.

Linda checked her hair in the window of the van and turned to greet the other leader and her two volunteers. The legendary Barb Randall was a heavyset woman, older than Linda was by at least ten years. Her teeth were a dark yellow and showed signs of decay; around the edges. Linda couldn't believe that she was the same-woman she'd heard so much about. Barb shook Linda's hand and introduced her team: Sharon, a thin, middle-aged woman and Jack Fry.

Mrs. Brown, Mr. Fry said, shaking her hand, do you have ALICE packed and ready?

My name is Linda, she said, not Alice.

He laughed and explained the acronym stood for All-purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment.

Oh, you mean backpacks; she said.

Right, he said, dazzling her with a bright smile, and please call me Jack.

With only an hour of daylight left, they had to hurry if they were going to hike in a little ways and set up camp before nightfall, so they ,set out on the trail right away.

When they arrived at the site, Barb informed Linda of Girl Scout regulations that all tents occupied by men must be at least one-quarter mile away from the girls' tents. That included children. Although Tater Tot teared up a little bit and begged Linda to sleep with her in her tent, Linda felt obligated to follow the rules to the letter, as she had promised to do at all times when being sworn in as a leader twelve years before. The rules were in place for the health and safety of the girls, so she always traveled with up-to-date health forms and the proper adult-to-child ratio. When they were Daisies and Brownies, she always managed to have enough help on hand, even if she had to drag her

husband to the-meetings. When they became Juniors and Cadettes, she'd had each parent take turns as chaperones. Now that they were Senior Scouts, she still clung to the rules. She always had them wash their dishes in the five-step, five-water pan set-up that they had taught her at camp training, and she even carried a thermometer to make sure the final, iodine rinse pan remained above 120 degrees at all times. She measured their latrine holes to make sure they were the required ten to twelve inches in depth, and she had personally inspected each pack to make sure they did not exceed the maximum girl-to-gear weight ratio and that bedrolls included the required extra blanket. Whenever anyone was over the weight limit, Linda carried the extra gear in her pack. She was totally responsible for those girls at all times; rules were rules.

The two troops worked together and made a rock circle. They started the fire in a series of tee-pees: first tinder, then kindling, then progressively bigger fuel until they had a decent heat source and cooking area. They ate dinner, cleaned up, ate s'mores, cleaned up., and then hung their food in a tree away from camp and away from bears. They sang songs-*God Bless My Underwear*, *The Littlest Worm*, *Say Boom Chick a Boom*, and finally, *Taps*.

The girls started getting ready for bed, and Linda said she would walk with Tater Tot and Mr. Fry to their tent to make sure her son got settled in for the night. Jack carried a shovel full of hot coals with them, so he could start a little fire at their site and sit up awhile until Todd fell asleep. Linda led the way with her flashlight.

Linda climbed in the tent and helped Tater Tot into his pajamas and his sleeping bag. She hugged and kissed him, and he begged her to lie down with him until he fell

asleep. It took about ten minutes for the boy to settle down, and it took another ten minutes for him to drop off to sleep.

When Linda backed out of the tent, Jack had a nice fire going and had set up a flat log across two rocks to make a bench. He signaled for her to sit down next to him, and she did. We finally get to talk, Linda, he said.

Mr. Fry, I've been talking to you all night.

I really want you to call me Jack, he said. We don't have to be so formal since I decked your husband.

I've been wanting to apologize for him, she said.

I'm the one who should be sorry, he said. But I'm sorry I'm not sorry.

Linda laughed. He did ask for it.

He just doesn't seem your type, Jack said. You're in such fine physical shape, so buff, as my daughter would say, and he's so, I mean, on a little boy like Todd, it's cute, all those extra little rolls and those chubby cheeks, Jack said, but on a grown man-

It's not so pretty, Linda said and laughed and then sighed. Normally, she would laugh it off and say he wasn't that way when she got him or say there was more of him to love now. She'd never let on to anyone that she was less than happy with her husband, and here she'd blurted it out to a virtual stranger.

She changed the subject. I wanted to thank you for the flowers, she said. They were beautiful.

For a beautiful lady, Jack said. When Linda stammered a little in looking for a reply, he assured her he meant every word and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

The tiny kiss sent tingles down her back. She shivered.

Jack said, oh you must be cold, and slipped his arm around her shoulder. He moved closer so that his chest covered her side and her shoulder tucked squarely under his arm. He was warm and smelled faintly of fresh air, smoke and sweat mingled together with Mennen Speed Stick.

She sTurnbled over her words. I'd better get back to the girls.

Jack assured her the girls were fine. They were almost adults and besides, there were two other adults with them. He told her that he'd heard what a fine Girl Scout leader she was, how active she was with her children, with the school with the community. He told her how impressed he was with her because she was an amazing woman who handled so much so effortlessly, who really knew what she wanted and went after it.

Linda started tearing up. It's hard, she told him. Keeping up appearances.

He nodded, started to rub her shoulders and told her to keep talking.

She told Jack she was sometimes overwhelmed with it all. So what if she could make muffins in an oven made out of a cardboard box or feed her whole troop with nothing but some vegetables, a quarter pound of hamburger, and a twelve-inch square of aluminum foil? Did he have any idea how hard it was to try to do everything perfectly, or at the very least, to make everyone think she did everything perfectly? She told him how worried she was about the kids growing up and leaving her alone in that house with Todd Sr. She told him how unsupportive her husband was of her efforts, how they hadn't had sex in over two months, how lonely she really was and how depressed she sometimes got over it all.

She didn't tell him that just the week before, right after she'd spent an entire day cleaning the house for her girls' parents to come over to discuss the trip, she'd found ants in her kitchen. She didn't tell him that an ant formation swarming all over the counter on an Australian-shaped puddle of Kool-Aid had been the final incident that plunged her into a state of panic. The next day she was driving to Tops, thinking about her life, and crying so much she could barely see the road. I mean, ten people saw those squirming ants and had probably spread it all over town that she lived like that. The shame was almost unbearable, and she'd thought for a moment how suicide" by semi would just look like an unfortunate car accident to everyone. The memory of her momentary weakness threatened to make her cry, so she turned and buried her face in Jack's wide chest.

He tipped her head up to his and kissed her deep and hard. His tongue worked its way inside her mouth, and then his mouth slid across her cheek, down her neck, across her collarbone. His breath was hot on her skin. His arms pulled her closer. His hands held the back of her head, gently tangling in her hair, then slid down her back and up her side to gently cup her breast. His thumb rubbed over her nipple as he kissed her mouth again.

Linda moaned, then she jumped up and ran back down the trail to her tent.

Linda was up at 5 a.m. She'd hardly slept the night before. She'd liked being kissed by Jack, but she'd never cheated on her husband before. She felt guilty for not feeling guiltier. Wasn't she entitled to some pleasure in her life? Didn't she just give and give? Between running her children everywhere, cleaning the house, making sure their clothes were always spotless and pressed, planning her troop meetings and trips,

attending her kids' every event, every concert, every game, every school board meeting, every music booster meeting, every C.S.O. meeting, working in the concession stands, chaperoning dances, planting flowers at the old folks home, and hostessing the Christmas and retirement parties for Todd's work, she felt she never had any time for herself. And now Todd expected her to get a job to help save for a Winnebago that she didn't even want. Jack Fry probably wouldn't be seen dead in an R V.

Linda rekindled the fire and thought about Jack's fire the night before. She'd never felt so alive as she did then. Jack had made her catch her breath and feel her heart beat in her chest. It had been a long time since Linda felt that way. She started the water for coffee and dishes and wondered whom she would be hurting if she pursued this thing with Jack. Todd Sr. didn't love her like he used to because, if he did, he would be a better husband to her. It wasn't any concern of her children or of anybody else for that matter, especially if they kept it a secret which they would have to do.

She cleaned herself up and wished she'd packed jeans that made her ass look better. She brushed her dirty blonde hair into a ponytail and added some gloss to her lips with Chapstick. Linda rolled up her tent and packed all her gear except the mess kit. At six o'clock she woke her troop and told them to start packing up while she went down the trail to check on Tater Tot.

She laughed to herself about how nervous she felt approaching Jack's camp. Her hands were shaking, and her cheeks felt hot. She was going to go for it, and the decision made her stop, square her shoulders, and take a few deep breaths to calm herself. When his camp came into sight, Linda saw Jack, shirtless, with his back to her washing himself

with a soapy cloth. He turned and she admired the muscles on his flat stomach and the graying hair on his wide chest.

He quickly put his shirt on. Todd's making a head call, Jack said, stuffing the wet washcloth into a plastic bag. He'll be right back, and we'll all go have breakfast.

He's what?

Going to the bathroom, Jack said.

About last night, Linda said.

He backed away. I shouldn't have--

Linda stepped closer. But I wanted--

Shhh! Jack said. The trees have eyes, he said, bending down to stuff the tent into his ALICE pack. We want to avoid any scuttlebutt.

Scuttlebutt? Linda repeated. She was confused by his reaction, so she started rearranging her son's gear, folding it neatly into his pack.

Yeah, rumors, gossip, tongue wagging, scuttlebutt. My town is just as small as-- Mom! Tater Tot ran from the woods and hugged his mother around the waist, burying his face into her stomach. Let's go back to the other camp right now, Mom.

Oh, honey. Linda bent to hug him, but Jack put a hand on her shoulder. His touch made a warm spot on her skin right through the flannel shirt.

You go see about breakfast, Jack said to her, winking. We'll be right behind you. Won't we, Todd? Go on now, Jack said. We're going to finish packing up and police the area. You know that scouts have to leave a place cleaner than they found it.

That's the rule, all right, Linda said turning to leave. Hurry and finish up here, Tater Tot, she said to her son. Mommy will make you some pancakes for breakfast. To Jack, Linda smiled and said, I'll see you back at camp.

The two troops started out on the Tracy Ridge Run at 8:30. By ten, Linda's girls were complaining about their heavy packs and the force march pace Mr. Fry was leading them on. The trip was supposed to be fun, they whined. We're hungry, they complained. If he doesn't slow down, her daughter Kim said, I'm going to sit down and refuse to get up. Even Tater Tot was slowing them down, hanging onto Linda's hand and begging her to carry his pack for a little while.

Barb's troop was disgusted by their behavior. Didn't they go on practice runs to prepare themselves? Were they going to let an old man put them to shame? At least the guy they brought wasn't slowing them down and whining like a little baby. They'd better pick up the pace *if* they were going to cover the ten miles to their next camp before dark. If they were hungry, why didn't they snack on their gorp, the trail mix they'd made that morning?

Because it tastes like shit, Linda's daughter, Shelly, said back to them.

You will watch your mouth, Linda said to her and made her apologize to the other troop for her rude behavior. Linda smiled and shrugged at Barb. Kids, you know how it *is*. No one really likes granola.

I really don't know how *it* is, Barb said. I've never seen such complainers in my whole life.

They stopped for lunch at noon in a small meadow by the Allegheny Reservoir where several hiking trails converged. The other troop ignored Linda's troop completely. They already had their buddy burners out of their packs, earning credits towards their outdoor cooking badge by preparing a hot trail meal in two mini coffee cans. Linda's girls dropped their packs, took off their boots, and started wading in the water. There were a few boats out, and her girls started calling to them.

Take me away from here, one girl cried.

Swim over to us, another girl yelled. Send us your men.

Excuse us, a minute, please, Linda said, and dragged her troop and Tater Tot behind a giant oak tree out of hearing range. She'd never been so embarrassed in all her life, she told them. They were strong, independent women who were up to the challenge. She knew they could do it, so they'd better suck it up. Did they want this troop to tell other troops? The rumors would be vicious. No one would want to travel with them again. Then what would they do? It's not like their parents would volunteer to go hiking with them. Now, get your butts over there and make up those sandwiches that we planned for lunch. Who is on the lunch committee? she asked. No one raised her hand. Please, Linda said, starting to tear up, don't do this to me.

She turned and left them standing there. She saw Jack watching her, so she squared her shoulders and ordered all her girls back into their boots, ASAP.

Her troop rose to the occasion, quickly making lunch, eating it, and setting out onto the new trail, but they gave her the silent treatment the whole time. Johnnycake ' Trail, carved steeply into the side of a mountain, skirted the edge of the reservoir about ten feet above the water. Every time Linda spoke to one of the girls, she would turn her

nose up in the air and hike a little faster down the trail and away from her, making Linda's heart beat with fear that one of them might fall over the edge and into the water. She held tightly onto Tater Tot's hand and guided him on the trail. Every time he tried to talk to her, she told him to be quiet so she could concentrate on keeping him safe.

The stress of the hike combined with the weight of her pack tied Linda's shoulders in tight knots. She remembered Jack's hands on them and thought about what might happen once they were alone. She wanted him to rub the tension out of all her muscles, and maybe they would go even farther than that. The night before, she could have stayed with him the whole time and no one would have known. She checked her watch. If the girls went to bed by eleven, she only had seven hours to wait until they could be alone.

The two troops arrived at their second camp after six o'clock. By the time they set up camp, cooked, ate, and cleaned up, it was after nine. Two hours, three at the outside, Linda thought, until she could be with Jack. She excused herself from the ghost stories being told around the campfire and scooped a pan of water from the reservoir to take to her tent. Tater Tot begged to go with her, but Linda told him to stay with Mr. Fry.

Once inside her tent, Linda stripped off her clothes and washed herself all over with the frigid water. She slathered deodorant under her arms and on all her pulse points. She wet down her hair, wishing she'd brought some shampoo and a mirror, and arranged it into a bun on the top of her head with a scrunchy. She changed into fresh socks and put on her flannel pajamas with absolutely nothing underneath. Finally, she put her jacket and hiking boots back on and walked back to the fire.

Her troop laughed at her. Victoria's Secret called, one of them said, and you didn't make the cut.

Very funny, Linda thought, but at least they were talking to her again. Linda saw Jack glance at her, smile, and quickly look away.

Mommy! Tater Tot ran to her and hugged her. The stories are so scary. Please let me stay with you.

I'll go lie with you in your tent until you fall asleep, Linda said, her heart beating fast, thinking about getting the boy and the entire troop off into dreamland as soon as possible. How's that sound, honey?

No, I'm not tired, Tater Tot said. He stomped his feet. He crossed his arms. He cried and begged to stay with her.

Barb and Sharon rolled their eyes, and Linda saw them. Jack was in quiet conversation with his daughter and some of the girls from the other troop.

Shhh, sweetie, Linda said out loud. You must be really tired from such a long day. Let me hold you by the fire for a while. In his ear she whispered that he'd better straighten up or else.

Linda sat on a log, and Tater Tot sat on her lap. She tried to get him to sit next to her or beside her on his sit-upon, but he insisted on clinging to her and sitting right on top of her. The poor honey, Linda said to the other women. He's still my baby.

Then he should have stayed home with the baby sitter, Barb said.

Linda ignored her and tried to catch Jack's eye. He sat on the other side of the fire next to his daughter, poking the flames with a long stick. Maybe he'd changed his

mind about her because of the horrible way her troop had acted on the hike? Not likely, though, Linda thought. He's probably just being discreet.

By eleven, Tater Tot was sound asleep on Linda's lap, and her legs were asleep underneath him. Mr. Fry, Linda asked, would you help me carry Tater Tot to bed? He's too heavy for me, and I hate to wake him and make him walk all that way to your tent.

I guess tonight he could sleep with you, Barb said.

But the rules-

I'm sure it will be-

But all his stuff is in Mr. Fry's tent, Linda said, her heart beating fast.

I'll go with my dad to get Tater Tot's gear, Jack's daughter said. Come on, Daddy. We'll all go. The whole troop on a night hike, it'll be fun.

We'll help you get him to your tent, mom, Shelly said, pulling her sister up to help them.

Linda had no choice but to take him to her tent with the girls.

The other troop returned with Tater Tot's gear but without Jack. Linda was disappointed that he hadn't even said good night to her. She casually asked about him.

My dad stayed at the tent, his daughter told Linda. He's getting too old for this kind of stuff.

Nonsense, Linda said, your father is in fine shape. She immediately regretted saying it, but no one seemed to notice because the girls were organizing a game of Ghosts in the Graveyard.

Aren't you all too tired? Linda asked. Shouldn't you be heading to bed soon?

Don't be a drag, Mom, her daughters whined.

Linda sat by the campfire with Barb and Sharon, who talked together about people Linda didn't know and future events they had planned for their troop. Linda had nothing to contribute to the conversation, so she poked the fire and thought about Jack. Maybe he was waiting for her to come to him after all the girls went to sleep. With his tent being a quarter-mile away and with Tater Tot out of the way, they would have all the privacy they needed.

At one o'clock the girls went to their tents. Linda still heard whispering and giggling at 1:30, so she stuck her head out of her tent door and ordered them all to go to sleep. At two, she yelled really loud and told them this was their final warning. If they were too tired to hike out of there in the morning, it would be their own faults.

She woke at seven to the sounds of the camp in full morning activities. Her eyes teared up when she realized she'd fallen asleep and missed her opportunity to be with Jack. She quickly threw on her clothes and woke up her son. He threw his arms around her neck and squeezed her tightly. She unwrapped the boy's arms from around her neck and told him to hurry.

Why didn't anyone wake me? she asked when she got out of her tent.

Her girls ignored her and continued packing up their gear. The silent treatment again, Linda thought. What was she supposed to do, let them stay up all night?

The morning passed in a blur of activities. The troops cooked, ate, cleaned up, packed up, and had a brief closing ceremony around the fire pit. At the ceremony, the other troop presented Barb with a wreath made out of grapevines and decorated with wild flowers. My troop is so thoughtful, Barb said through her happy tears. They're the best girls.

We have the best leaders, the girls said and enveloped Barb and Sharon in a group hug.

Linda sniffled to herself. Did her girls show her any consideration? Besides, didn't the other troop realize that it's against Girl Scout regulations to pick wild flowers? Linda had a raging headache. She tried all morning to get next to Jack, but there was too much to do and too many people in their way. Her girls were being uncooperative, and Tater Tot hung on her like a burdock.

They headed back on the trail to complete the circle that would take them back to their cars. They had descended 1000 feet to the reservoir over the past two days, and they had to make the climb back up in the four miles left of the trail. All her girls kept up with the other troop, but Linda was slowed down considerably by Tater Tot. He was crying and complaining about his heavy pack. He stopped every twenty minutes to go pee. Linda had to practically drag him up the mountain.

Knock it off, already, she told him. I'm never taking you camping with us again.

Good, he said, sitting down and refusing to move. I hate camping. I hate your Girl Scouts. I hate Mr. Fry.

Linda slapped him on the fleshy part of his arm. You march your little rear end up that hill, she told him, and don't you say another word until we get to the van. Is that clear?

I'm telling my dad, Tater Tot said. I'm telling him everything. You're not going to be telling him anything if you don't get moving. Linda and Tater Tot got to the cars at two o'clock.

We've been waiting almost an hour, Kim said from where she and the rest of the group lay around in the shade off to the edge of the parking lot. Barb and Sharon sat on the trunks of their cars drinking water.

Tater Tot walked over to his sisters and fell on the ground next to them.

We were just getting ready to come looking for you, Jack said, walking up to Linda. Here, let me help you with your gear. He pulled the pack off her back and carried it to her van. She stayed right with him'.

Jack, she said, I'm sorry about last night-

Shhh, he whispered and winked, no scuttlebutt.

Meet me somewhere, she said quickly, opening the back of the van.

Jack was silent. He glanced at the two leaders approaching the van. Where? he said so softly Linda wasn't quite sure he actually said it.

She whispered, Meet me next Saturday night, seven o'clock at the bar of the new Holiday Inn in Brockport.

Linda didn't wait for a response. She turned and shook hands with Barb and Sharon, thanking them for coming along with them. They nodded without smiling and then started talking to Jack.

Linda shrugged and hollered to her girls, Load up the van. The train's leaving.

Linda's troop all chose to ride with Shelly again, so Linda took Tater Tot and all the gear in her van. She gave the girls a few minutes' head start, as required by Girl Scout travel regulations, and then headed down the highway towards home.

Tater Tot sat in the front seat and looked at the floor. Linda tried to cheer him up by telling him it was a really hard hike and that he did a fine job for as young as he was.

The boy started crying. You're a terrible mom, he said.

Now, Tater Tot, Linda soothed: She pointed out the convoy of tractor-trailers coming at them. Why don't you see if you can get one of them to honk their horns? she asked him. You liked doing that on the way here.

He just shrugged. You're a terrible Girl Scout leader, too, he said. I wish I'd stayed home with Dad. I'm never going anywhere with you again.

Linda grew quiet, blocking out the sound of his whining. She thought about Todd Sr. at home, and she thought about Jack somewhere on the same highway on his way home, too. She sighed, heading in the same direction yet feeling somehow that her destination had nothing to do with her, nothing to do with home.

Linda's hands tingled on the steering wheel as another semi sped towards them in the other lane.

Away from the Light

*I am afraid of blind people
I always knew it
I ride the same train every day
And see the same blind men
They are ugly
Rolling their marble eyes
And tapping canes ...*

*-excerpt from the poem, All the Things I Cannot Do
by Alice Glarden Brand*

Karen Vale checks her reflection in the butter knife. No food is stuck in her teeth; no stray lipstick wanders outside the lines. She is free to smile at her date, and she does each time he tells a joke or says something remotely witty. He is a lawyer or a stockbroker; she can't recall but knows he must make a good living to take her to *Chez Henri*, the most exclusive restaurant in all of Buffalo. Marc is a fine me specimen. At just over six foot tall with dark hair and wide shoulders, he's exactly Karen's type. His carefully tailored suit, the silk tie, the alligator shoes just scream *money*. Karen hopes

somebody from her office or, better yet, from her ex-husband's office will see her there with him.

"So," her date says, "how long have you been divorced?"

She expects the question and answers, "Almost five years." She recites the condensed version that she's developed over the years, the one that makes her appear well-adjusted and mature. They merely wanted different things from life. No one was to blame, really. It was one of those young and foolish mistakes that only becomes apparent when you've already grown too far apart, 'Changed too much to ever find your way back to each other: The date swallows it whole, as Karen knew he would. The martyr routine she'd first used had been quickly discarded when she realized men didn't like to hear her bitterness over helping David establish a fine medical career and respected place in the community before he dumped her for his office nurse. How cliché is that story? It also scares off a majority of men to learn that she doesn't ever want to have children. They look at her as if she is somehow defective. David used to accuse her of being half a woman, saying she ran to hide when they were handing out biological clocks. The bastard! Men have no idea how children ruin a woman. Karen sees the stretch marks and flabby bellies on her daily visits to the gym. No, thank you. She is fit and trim at forty, looking better than most women who are half her age.

"You have a healthy attitude," her date says. "I'm always impressed by an amicable divorce." She decides he's a lawyer as he launches into his own tale of woe involving irreconcilable differences, alimony, community property, child support, alternating visitation, joint custody, blah, blah, blah. Karen tunes him out. Like a banker refusing to give a loan, she mentally stamps his application *denied/excessive obligations*.

Karen takes him home after dinner and ushers him back out the door by midnight. He may call once or twice; most men can't help themselves, but that's not her problem. She applies a thick layer of cold cream to her smooth complexion removing every trace of make-up. The face-lift she got after the divorce is holding up well, but it never hurts to keep up with basic maintenance. Karen smooths on an alpha-hydroxy moisturizer with night repair beads. She stares at her reflection, pleased by what she sees and by what she doesn't see. She inspects her honey blonde hair for dark roots and finds none. She has no body fat, only lean muscle mass. Her skin glows. There are no wrinkles, no blemishes, and no unnecessary hairs. Her blue eyes shine back at her in the mirror. She spent the last of her divorce settlement on corrective laser surgery, so she no longer wears contact lenses or glasses. Karen does her fifty nightly sit-ups, pulls on her satin sleep mask, and goes to bed.

The phone wakes her at nine. "Are you still in bed, lazybones?"

"Who's calling?" Karen gets out of bed and looks in the mirror.

"It's Marc," the man tells her. "Marc Cleary? You know, from last night."

Karen groans, partly at herself for not letting the machine get the phone and partly at her hair in the mirror. "Marc, hi. Uh--"

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Marc says cutting her off. "Listen, it's a beautiful day and I thought, if you weren't doing anything ..."

"Well, I--" Karen scrambles for an excuse.

Marc interrupts, "Come on. I want to see you again."

"How sweet," Karen says. "I really have other plans, and I'm not sure--"

"How about tomorrow?" Karen gives him credit for being persistent.

"I can't make it," Karen tells him. She picks up her hairbrush and works it through the tangles.

"I'll take you to Letchworth State Park," Marc says. "It's a beautiful place for a beautiful lady."

"Marc, really." Is the man blind? Can't he recognize the brush-off when he sees it? Karen is aggravated, yet flattered, by his stubbornness. She briefly considers keeping him around to meet some of her short term needs; after all, he's not too shabby under the covers, and he is easy on the eyes. However, she decides a recently divorced man with two or three kids is too much for her to handle right now. She has no desire to be his rebound lover. "Marc, someone is at the door," she lies. "I'll talk to you later." The phone is already cradled in its receiver when he says good bye.

For the human eye to focus properly, a complex process must take place. Light rays first pass through the Bowman's membrane covering the outer eye. The rays are then passed through the eye by way of the gently curved cornea. They pass through the cornea and the Anterior Chamber full of the Aqueous Humor fluid behind it. The lens receives the light after it passes through the Vitreous Humor fluid in the main cavity of the eye. On their way through these steps, the rays are refracted, or bent, so they can converge at the retina, a nerve layer, consisting of light-sensing cells, lining the back of the eye. The retina converts the light rays to impulses that are sent through the optic nerve to the brain for interpretation of images. When the light is not refracted properly, vision problems are the result. These problems are called refractive errors. Over sixty million Americans suffer from the refractive error myopia, or near-sightedness. The

myopic eye is longer than a normal eye, and the corneal surface is too curved to allow the light rays to reach all the way to the retina. Myopia is not a disease, but rather it is a disorder that results in the retina transmitting blurry images to the brain. Over one-quarter of the population of the United States suffers from this disorder.

Marc approaches Karen's door with a dozen roses, but he hesitates to knock. She isn't expecting him, and he hopes he's not moving too fast. His ex-wife used to accuse him of working too much and never taking her feelings into consideration. He's decided not to let the same behavior ruin things with another woman. His past experiences have taught him how to act, and buying flowers is just the beginning.

Karen Vale answers the door, a vision in a short red skirt, black stockings, and matching red heels. Marc notices her raised eyebrows and wide eyes. She takes the flowers and asks, "What are you doing here?" She doesn't ask him in.

Marc is momentarily at a loss, but then it dawns on him that someone with Karen's extraordinary beauty would have to worry about crazy boyfriends and stalkers. He realizes he'll have to show her that he presents no danger. He understands her unwillingness to get close to him. Maybe she thinks he's using her for sex, but he's not like that. Karen is the first woman he's been with since his divorce last year, although he's had plenty of opportunities to be with other women. He senses Karen may be different and truly wants to know her better. "I know I should've called," Marc says. "But, I'll leave if you-I mean I had a great time last night and well--"

"Come in," Karen says. "I was getting ready to go get a bite to eat. Maybe you could join me."

"That would be great," Marc says, smiling a smile that crinkles the corner of his eyes like a paper fan. "I'll treat." He likes Karen. He had a good time at dinner last night, and she looks even better tonight. He makes a mental note to thank his sister, Sue, for setting up the blind date. Sue has a secretarial job in the same medical complex where Karen works. Sue told him Karen's story of how her husband had used her to further his career and then thrown her away. On their dinner date, she had never even mentioned her side of the story. He admired Karen's philosophical attitude and her brave facade regarding her divorce. He can only hope his ex-wife would do the same for him, although he doubts it. For the past year, Marc had tried to explain to her how he'd changed, how he wanted a second chance to be a husband and father, but she'd refused to listen. He vowed that when he found another woman to love, he would control his temper and spend more time with her. He's hoping Karen is that woman.

Marc turns on the television to watch the news while Karen finishes getting ready. It is just coming on when she announces that she's ready to go. "'Hang on," Marc says. "I want to catch the lead story to see if it's about the waterfront project. I'm trying to keep it in the news, but the stations won't cooperate." Karen nods, sighs, and sits down next to him on the couch as the anchorman, Irv Weinstein, comes on the screen.

"Our lead story tonight," Irv says, "comes to us live from the prestigious Buffalo Park Eye Institute."

"That's where I go," Karen says.

"Me too," Mark says and leans closer to the edge of the couch.

The camera focuses, and Marc recognizes the same room where he had been four years earlier for an educational seminar on the benefits of the brand new PRK laser eye

surgery. Mark is a planner and a detail man by nature, and he attended solely to gather information, to weigh his options. The presentation by Dr. George Freely had been fascinating, the risks minimal, the success rate astronomical, the price manageable, the benefits unfathomable. He had taken only a week to determine that it was something he must do to be free of the thick, heavy glasses he'd been dependent upon since the age of eight.

"They better not be trying to sell something else," Karen says. "I already paid enough for the surgery."

"Look," Mark says. "It's Dr. Freely." He's with several other doctors in white jackets, a man in an Army uniform heavily laden with stars and stripes, and several men and one woman in three-piece business suits. Dr. Freely approaches the podium and adjusts the microphone.

Marc puts his arm around Karen as the doctor begins to speak. "Four years ago after an exhaustive two-year study by the U.S. Army," Dr. Freely begins, "this prestigious institute in conjunction with the most esteemed and qualified ophthalmologists from the University at Buffalo's Medical School and in cooperation with the Food and Drug Administration of the United States and the cutting edge technology of Summit Pharmaceutical's Excimer laser began trials on the general population of the newly approved procedure Photorefractive Keratectomy Surgery, more commonly known as PRK." Marc watches the doctor's face, and he fills with dread. He's seen that look before, the one with the soft eyes afraid to meet other eyes and accompanied by the most carefully chosen words. The doctor's face shows sorrow and pity.

In the past, vision was correctable only through prescription glasses and contact lenses. The search for a more permanent solution began in Japan and Columbia as early as the 1960's. In the early 1970's the first Radial Keratotomy, or RK, surgery was performed in Russia. In that procedure radial incisions were cut in a spoke-like fashion to flatten the cornea and correct vision problems. Many patients reported severe side effects that were named GASH-glare, astigmatism, sensitivity to light, and halos. Doctors have been improving on that initial procedure in the past two decades. Post-operative infection rates have dropped by more than half since the widespread implementation of post-operative antibiotics in the 1980's. In the 1990's the number of patients a doctor can treat has increased proportionately to the dramatic drop in time it now takes to perform many procedures. In optics, as in other areas of health care, lasers have replaced scalpels as the instrument of choice.

Karen barely remembers the fifteen-minute drive to Marc's Brampton Avenue home in Williamsville, but she is happy he decided to cook for her rather than take her to a restaurant. She's too upset to eat anyway. Dr. Freely had droned on about the occurrence of delayed side effects, the importance of long-term studies, and unknown territories. The reporter did little to clarify the technical jargon as he discussed the onset of mass anopsia, the inevitable occurrence of typhlosis sixty to sixty-five months after surgery, and amaurosis among the participants in the United States Army study.

Karen rubs her arms to warm herself and feels the tenderness of a bruise. During the news broadcast, Marc's hand had squeezed her shoulder harder and harder. She dabs

her eyes carefully as she remembers the moment of realization. She would be receiving a letter in the mail telling her what she'd heard on the television. She was going blind.

"I won't accept this," Karen says, shaking free of the memory. "It must be a mistake. There must be something they can-do."

"I don't think so," Marc says and moves closer to Karen and holds her. "We can't be sure it even concerns us until we get the letter."

"Weren't you paying attention?" she asks. "I don't know about you, but I know I had the surgery four years ago; that's two years before they perfected that laser. Why are they just telling us this now?"

Marc folds her in his arms, and she feels smothered. Karen jumps up to pace the floor. "We'll sue the bastards," she says pointing to Marc. "You're a lawyer. We'll fight. We'll--"

"Karen, Karen! Sit down here." Marc pats the couch next to him. "Please calm down. I know this is a shock. I . . . It ... We need some time to--"

"We don't have any time," Karen cuts him off. "Weren't you listening?" She resents his patronizing attitude. Can't he see how devastated she is? "Marc, we need to make them pay. We should get something for what they've done to us."

"Karen, listen to me," Marc says. He stands in front of her. "We elected to have that surgery. It was an elective procedure. We signed waivers, waivers that are prepared by lawyers to be full of CYAC's-that's cover your ass clauses."

Karen's eyes tear up. She looks up to the ceiling and blinks to stop the flow of tears. "But there must--"

"There's not." Marc pulls her into his arms.

Karen lets herself be held in his arms. How can this be happening? The tears come faster. How will she manage? How will she put her make-up on or do her hair? How will she know if her clothes match or if her stockings have a run? How will she get around? She buries her face in his chest and stains his shirt with her mascara.

Marc kisses her head, her hair, her temples. "Shhh--" he says lifting her face. "Don't hide from me." He kisses her swollen eyelids and whispers, "You're beautiful" as he captures her lips with his.

Karen surrenders in her weakness. She undresses him slowly, staring into his eyes as tears stream down her face. Her sadness is overwhelming her, and she needs somebody right now. Karen wonders if Marc's will be the last male body she sees before she goes blind. She thinks how no man will want her when she can't see, and a sob catches in her throat. She smothers it by lunging for Marc's mouth and drawing comfort from his body.

Knifeless surgeries, such as PRK, have been hailed as major breakthroughs and marketed as non-invasive miracle treatments. As with all surgeries, PRK carries with it some risks. Patients are informed about the prevalence of GASH side effects, the likelihood of reduced night vision, and the rare cases where there may be overcorrection or undercorrection of vision. Occasionally, the follow up testing on the standardized Snellen eye chart reveals a significant diopter measurement of error, and a second operation, called an "enhancement," may be necessary. In 1996, an estimated 75,000 Americans underwent laser eye surgery. In 1997, the estimated number of surgeries was

150,000. These trends indicate that by 2000, as many as two million Americans will have undergone corrective laser eye surgery.

Marc smiles on his drive over to Karen's east-side apartment, thinking back over the last few weeks since he met her. The day at his house after the news broadcast she had trusted him enough to let him see the frail and frightened person under the perfect exterior. He was touched by her honesty, and that was when he knew they had something special together. He was there for support when she, too, got the letter confirming their suspicions. She had cried on his shoulder, and he had held her all night while she sobbed. He thinks how good it feels to be needed again. She had gone back into her protective shell after that first glimpse, but he can certainly understand it under the circumstances.

Their circumstances make his smile evaporate. How could he have been so foolish as to fall for all the market hype? He knew better than to participate in an experimental procedure; he has no one to blame but himself. The scale of the tragedy is staggering. All the television newsmagazines picked up the story right away. He has watched interviews with economists, medical experts, and saddest of all, with the army veterans who participated in the initial study. The first wave afflicted with blindness were young men in their twenties. He's seen interviews with people from all walks of life, from college students to retirees. He sighs at the unfairness of it as he arrives at Karen's.

"Dr. Freely was on the TV again today," Karen says as soon as she opens the door. "Do you know what he said? Do you? Well, I'll tell you. He had the nerve, the

unmitigated gall, to say, 'I didn't get the surgery because my eyes are too important to me.' Can you believe it?"

"I can't believe it," Marc says, shaking his head. "That's terrible. I wonder if he would get it now that they've supposedly worked all the bugs out of the laser."

"I doubt it, the bastard," Karen says, her chest heaving. "Are you sure we can't sue him?"

"I've already told you it's not an option," Marc says and sighs. "Besides, I'm not going to waste our time-we have less than six months now." He pauses as those last words are finally said aloud. "Karen, there are so many other things I want to do, I need to do." Marc immediately made a plan and started following it; he can grieve later. He started to learn Braille through the local Center for Independent Living and ordered a set of Braille law books for his office. He also requested extra visitation with his children, Marky and Beth. He wants to memorize their faces for his own snapshot in time. It weighs heavily on his mind that he'll never know what they will look like when they grow up. He's also begun to feel concerned about Karen's denial of their situation. Except in bed, he never sees the woman for whom he first fell anymore. "Karen, let's go out."

"I can't. I'm kind of tired," Karen says. "I'm having a little trouble sleeping."

Marc hears her laugh but knows her smile is an illusion. He sees the dark circles under her-eyes and the newly paved worry lines across her forehead. He convinces her to get some fresh air with him, and they drive around town, past the theater district, the colleges, and the massive city cemetery.

They end up at the Buffalo Zoo. The animals pacing in their dilapidated cages sadden Marc. He knows he'll never see them happy in the new zoo under construction down by the waterfront. His law firm was instrumental in spearheading the waterfront renewal project, and he would never see the fruits of his labor there either. "Look at that elephant," Marc says to Karen. "He's magnificent."

"And smelly." Karen laughs.

It's the first sign of her depression lifting all day, and Marc pounces on it, laughing a little too loudly. "Yeah, he is rank but so powerful. I've always wanted to see them in Africa, in their natural environment." He waves his arms at the dirty pen. "But this will have to do for now."

"For always." Karen says quietly and walks away.

Marc could kick himself. She was finally starting to lighten up, and he had to bring up how he'd never see Africa. How insensitive! He catches up to her and puts his arm around her. "You know," Marc says, "they have some baby tiger cubs in that building." He leads her into the dark green building, and they look through a dirty, glass partition at the tiny kittens.

"They're born blind," Karen says. "And we'll die blind."

Marc pretends he doesn't hear her and says, "Look how the mother snuggles them. Isn't it nice that something so ferocious can be so gentle? Like me."

Karen laughs. "I wouldn't exactly call you ferocious, Marc."

He wants to tell her how he used to be so inflexible and quick to anger, but her laughter stops him. He can tell she's in no mood for a serious discussion about his past and how he's changed. He wants to talk about their future together, how they could help

each other through this ordeal and how they could still have a full life and a family together, but he just leads her out of the building and down the crumbling sidewalk. "Do you want to see the snakes?" he asks.

"There's only one snake I want to see right now," she whispers in his ear. She sticks her tongue in his ear and sends shivers up his back. She quickly looks around the nearly deserted zoo and grabs Marc's crotch. He catches his breath at the unexpected advance. Karen convinces him to hurry back to her apartment, to her bedroom. Her sex drive is strong; she is a decisive and demanding lover. With traits like that, he knows she'll come around soon.

When they are done with their lovemaking, Marc gets out of bed immediately. It's not like him to just get up and leave, but he has to pick up his kids in an hour. He searches the darkened room for his clothes and finds his pants on the dresser and his shirt in the doorway. Karen lights a cigarette, and he asks her, "When did you start smoking?"

"It's an old habit I just recently picked back up," she says, exhaling. "Just to help me cope, you know." She laughs dryly. "Just shortening the sentence."

"Now don't be like that again," Marc says and sits next to her on the bed. "Why don't you come with me to pick up the kids? It'll be fun."

"Nope, not tonight." Karen snuggles deeper under the covers and smiles at Marc. She imitates Mae West. "You wore me right out, big boy. I'm turning in early tonight."

Marc laughs and kisses her on the forehead and tucks the blankets snugly around her petite body just like he used to do with little Beth every night before the divorce. It's nice to have someone to take care of again.

After patients sign the standardized informed consent waiver, they are given a medication to help them relax. Eye drops, made from a cocaine-based derivative, are administered to numb each eye slated to undergo the procedure. The patient sits straight in a comfortably padded chair and leans forward. The chin and forehead rest against form-fitting plastic straps. The doctor inserts one end of a disposable plastic clamp under each eyelid and locks the device in place. The eyelids are held wide open. Patients are instructed to focus their eyes on a distant light in the corner of the darkened room. It is crucial for the eyes to never wander from their assigned focal point. The eyes are not paralyzed, and saccadic, or involuntary, movements still occur. Patients stare at the light and their eyes water reflexively. Blinking is impossible.

As soon as Marc leaves, Karen jumps out of bed and turns on the light. She has developed an overwhelming fear of the dark. That first night after the seminar she had pulled her silk sleep mask over her eyes out of habit. The darkness had been stifling. She couldn't breathe, and bile rose in her throat. She'd run into the bathroom and vomited in the toilet. She'd thrown her mask in the garbage and lain in bed with the lights on. Sleep would not come. Her heart pounded and her stomach heaved each time she closed her eyes. She'd allowed herself to drift off for an hour and woke sobbing, her skin clammy. She has not slept since.

Karen thinks how nice it is that Marc tries to take her out and do things because it helps to keep her awake. The trip to the zoo was a bit much, but the theater and the dinners are nice. The gambling in Niagara Falls was fun, and the sex is always great. If he would just quit talking about his kids so much. She knows all about eleven-year-old

Marky's falling grades and crooked teeth, nine-year-old Beth's talent for drama and the little freckle she has on the bridge of her nose by her tear duct that Marc confuses for a sleeper and tries to pick out of her eye. Karen wanted to tell him that the girl could cover that with make-up, but she just let him ramble on. As long as he doesn't expect her to play mommy, everything will be fine.

Karen thinks about doing her nightly exercises, but she doesn't. She hasn't been to the gym in these last few weeks either. She applies cold cream to her face and scowls at her new wrinkles, the dark circles. She really has to stop letting herself go. Her performance is starting to slip on the job, too. That first week she'd been able to sustain herself with the caffeine in coffee and soda pop. By the first weekend she'd grown so tired that she'd driven to the truck stop off exit 48A on the NYS Thruway. There she bought pep pills and speeders and other kinds of amphetamines. That second week she got so tired she caught herself dozing at her desk with her eyes open. She started taking more pills until she found the proper combination to keep her awake. Now, Karen never gets tired anymore.

Marc is the only person with whom she can discuss her impending blindness. She has no one else to tell and wants no one else to know. She's grown used to everyone around her, other women in particular, looking at her with jealous envy. The thought of them pitying her, or worse yet, feeling satisfaction from her suffering, would be more than she could bear. She'd made Marc promise not to tell his sister or anyone else about her secret. As a result, he serves double duty for her as both a sounding board and a pleasant distraction. If he would only help her sue that doctor, things would be perfect between them.

Karen's brow creases as she thinks of Dr. Freely, who she blames for the entire situation. He deceived her, but she is the one paying for his deception. She wants to pry his eyes right out of his head, slowly, very slowly, so he can feel just a tiny fraction of the pain he has caused her. Karen screams and throws her hairbrush at the eyes in the mirror, shattering the glass.

The Excimer Laser is no bigger than a ball-point pen, and the doctor holds it as such. One end of the laser points at the eye, and a wire at the opposite end connects the instrument to a state-of-the-art control panel. There the surgeon makes careful adjustments to assure the proper speed, temperature, and force of the beam. Unlike the earlier methods, the eye does not have to be pressurized during the PRK procedure; therefore, the entire operation takes only about thirty seconds per eye.

In the first ten seconds the epithelial layer of the central optical zone must be removed. Some specialists use a spatula blade to scrape it off, and some use chemicals to dissolve it away. Far and away the most common method of removing the epithelial is to fire laser pulses to form an annulus measuring six to eight millimeters on the exposed stroma. Regardless of the method, the initial ablation of the cornea's central and mid zones begins within this first third of the surgery, the peripheral area is left untouched by the laser. In the second step, the surgeon uses a steady hand to pulse the UV laser off and on in lightning blasts to reshape the cornea. A too heavy application of the beam can leave pits or craters on the surface; too light an application produces central islands of raised tissue. The corneal tissue rapidly absorbs each pulse, and its internal surface- cell fluid boils. The cells vaporize and expand, exploding the cell walls and forcing a

microscopic plume of moisture to squirt from the eye. In the final stage of the procedure, the doctor removes the eye clamps and administers an antibiotic eye drop. A gritty sensation in the eye persists for several days.

"Karen, let's go camping in the Adirondacks," Marc says. "My car is all packed. All you need are some clothes." His request is met by silence. "Come on. I'll help you pack. It'll be fun. I'll feed you. I'll protect you."

"You can't protect me, Marc." Karen sneers at him. "Obviously."

"Karen, I think you need help dealing with this." He is growing tired of forcing her to participate in everything. He's a lawyer, not a psychiatrist. He can't understand how she has not read one book since receiving their horrible sentence or enjoyed one sunrise; her refusal to take advantage of their limited time boggles his mind. "Maybe you should come with me to my support group meetings at the eye center."

"I will never set foot in that chop shop again," Karen answers him and refuses to meet his eyes. She is thin and looks exhausted. "You may enjoy broadcasting your troubles to a bunch of strangers and making a spectacle of yourself, but I happen to be a private individual."

"It's very helpful to share with others who are experiencing the same feelings you are. It helps you, and it helps them." Marc reaches out to hold her, but she slaps him away.

"Do you think, because you are so *good*, so *perfect*, that you'll somehow be spared? Get off your high horse, Marc, and face reality. You are going to be as handicapped, as crippled, as helpless and blind as I will." Her voice raises and her eyes

stare through him like the eyes of the dead. "We'll need people to do everything for us. We might as well be dead now."

"That's not true. I'm crushed too, but I just don't have time to have my own personal pity party, like some people I *know*."

"You bastard," Karen says.

"I'm not a bastard," Marc says. "I'm a realist. There's help out there if you'd just quit wallowing in your sad little world and go for it. There are devices, new advances, seeing-eye dogs." Marc ticks off the list on his fingers. "There are special schools and special--"

"Isn't that just special? Quit living in a dream world, Marc. Do you know how many people are going to be trying to take advantages of those services? And how am I going to pay for that? We can't sue the fucking butcher who did this to us. We can't collect compensation or disability from our employers. You told me that yourself. I won't be able to work anymore. I won't be able to leave the house."

"You barely leave the house now, Karen."

"Well, look at me." Karen holds her arms wide, and again Marc sees the toll this ordeal has taken on her. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. I can't breathe."

"Let me help you. 1--"

"I don't need your help. I don't want it. All I want from you is your body in my bed and no hassles." Karen squares her shoulders and faces him. "Get with the program, honey."

"What program?" Marc asks. "Yours? You're not even living in the real world, Karen. We walk down the street and you don't say anything. You don't look at me or at

any of the people around you. You're too busy staring at your reflection in the store windows when you should be counting steps or memorizing obstacles."

"That's bullshit," Karen says. "I am not going to act like I'm blind when I can see perfectly well. I see you for what you are, Marc. You're a wimp. You're just going to lie down like a dog and let them beat you. You won't even fight!"

"I can't fight this," Marc yells. "I can't stop it; I'm not God."

"You're not even a man," Karen says. "The only time you're a real man is when you're in the bed. Other than that, you're useless."

Marc starts to reply but doesn't. Her words confirm his growing suspicions that their relationship is merely an illusion. His loneliness and their shared dilemma had drawn them together in the absence of more tangible connections. He had foolishly mistaken their raw passion for feelings that weren't real, had never even existed at all. He had wasted so much time discovering nothing but the ugly truth: They have no prospect for a future together.

"Well, say something," Karen screams at him. "You can't say anything because you know I'm right."

Marc's brief glimpse into Karen's mind has destroyed anything he thought he felt for her. He says nothing and slams the door on his way out.

The slow process of healing begins immediately after surgery. Because the eye is avascular, meaning it contains no blood vessels, healing occurs through the formation of lamellae, or scar tissue layers. The Bowman's membrane does not grow back; rather, a microscopic layer of scar tissue fills in the space left by its absence. This natural

occurrence is known as initial barrier restoration or epithelial infill. The new layer is very thin, so the eye has an increased susceptibility to trauma during the process of corneal recovery wherein it takes up to two years for the layer to regain its former thickness. The final stage, corneal wound remodeling, occurs as each new layer of scar tissue forms around the existing layers. This process continues indefinitely as new layers form at the average rate of one per year, thickening and firming the surface. Crowding caused by these new layers slowly forces the internal fluid out of the eye through the tear ducts. The fluid loss is the catalyst for a slow shriveling of the lens. Layer after layer of scar tissue wrap around the already massive formation. The cornea clouds, and, approximately sixty months after the initial procedure, white leucomas erupt on the surface of the eye causing the cornea to rupture. No light can penetrate the eye. The inevitable result is blindness.

Karen sits at her dressing table and reaches for her cold cream. It has been almost a month since Marc left her, but she knows he'll come crawling back. They always do. She wonders if Marc is responsible for the fact that none of the lawyers she's called have been willing to take her case. He may have been right about the doctor not being liable, but she suspects that he warned his good old boy lawyer friends not to take her case.

Will he feel the same when he can't see? She doubts it. She can't remember if his surgery was before or after hers, but the five-year anniversary of her surgery is in four months and his must be close to the same time. The scariest part is that there will be no warning, just darkness. He'll call when it happens. Who else would he call?

Karen leans over to search for gray hairs and black roots. The shattered mirror shows a circle of her faces, one eye in each wedge of glass, dozens of eyes staring back at her. She sighs and gets up to get the phone book. She thumbs through the yellow pages. It shouldn't take too long to have a new mirror put in her dressing table.

One of the Guys

An hour after we walked in the door Carmen said, "What is he doing here again? I ain't comfortable with brats running around my property." Her property, as she called it, was Dan's Dew Drop Inn, a small, concrete square with a flat, leaky roof on Route 77 about two miles out of Elmwood. The inside smelled like stale beer, Carmen's perfume, and those white things you stick in toilets that smell worse than pee, so you don't smell the pee. Outside it smelled like rotten eggs from the papermill ponds a half mile away at the Gypsum Plant.

Carmen sat on her comer barstool all made up like a porcelain doll, her dark lipstick bleeding into the lines around her mouth and her cheeks painted to match. She pulled her hair back so tight that her eyes, outlined with black, tilted up on the outside edges to make cat eyes. Each day she tied a different animal print scarf around her red and gray ponytail. Some days the scarf was leopard; some days it was zebra and some days, tiger. That day it was snake skin. I remember it so well because that was the one and only time I ever heard her talk.

"The boy don't cause you any trouble," Dad said. "He's a good kid." I knew it was true because if I were bad, I would have to wait outside in the car. Two years before, the Sn1ith kids had frozen to death in the parking lot of the Dew Drop while their parents were in having happy hour. Wanting to avoid the same fate, whether it was freezing in the winter or cooking in the summer, I was careful to stay out of the way. I sat in the comer drinking Cokes without straws, so I wouldn't be tempted to slurp, and eating potato chips with my mouth closed. Usually, I just played solitaire on the comer table, or I played pinball with the dime& Jake gave me:

"That ain't the point," she said and pointed above the door with the longest, reddest fingernails I had ever seen. "The sign says, 'Absolutely no one under eighteen allowed.' It's bad for business." Her voice was bigger than I had expected. I thought maybe she would hiss, but she actually had a nice voice. I wanted to hear more.

"Business," Dad said. "What business? Look around you, Carmen." She looked and I looked and the only people we saw were Carmen's grown up son, Junior, tending bar. He talked more than Carmen did, but not much more; usually he just grunted. Lloyd, Roy, Jake, and Dad were sitting around a table. A trail of greasy boot prints led from the door to where Lloyd sat dozing in his chair. Roy was drinking two fisted, one of his scarred hands wrapped around a shot glass and the other holding a mug of beer. Jake's big, hairy body took up one side of the table, his belly spilling over his pants and his tie trailing from his pants pocket to the floor. Joe would've probably been there too, rocking on his chair and whistling a tune, but he was back in the VA drying out again.

"We are your business," Dad said.

Carmen was silent again, a snake before the kill. She uncoiled her body off the stool to face Dad. Even with the help of her spiked heels, she barely reached Dad's shoulders. She held his gaze, breathing loudly, flaring her nostrils. We waited for her to strike, to draw first blood, but instead of a sharp flick of her tongue, I saw her eyelids and lips start to quiver. Mascara blazed a slow trail down her cheek as she retreated to her stool. I had to leave half my Coke on the table because Dad suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me to him. We stopped in front of Carmen, and Dad pulled a one-hundred-dollar bill from his wallet. He dropped it on the bar in front of her. "Here's for your troubles," he said: "Put it towards a new roof." Then we walked out the door.

After that day, all the guys started calling Dad Moneybags, which didn't seem to bother him at all. I never heard Carmen speak again. All day, everyday, she drank sloe-gin fizzes, smoked Lucky Strikes through a long black holder, and blew smoke rings that evaporated before they reached the yellowed ceiling. She never moved, never smiled. She just sat on her barstool by the window like a mannequin on display. She wouldn't even look at me, much less take me in the tavern kitchen and feed me ice cream topped with beer nuts like Barkeep Charlie's wife, Mitts, always did at the Village Inn.

Mitts was nice to me and to my dad and to all the other guys, always kissing and hugging and drinking shots of tequila and telling jokes. I never got the jokes because she would hold her hands tight over my ears right before all the guys laughed and spit beer all over the floor from out of their noses. Sometimes they'd laugh so hard that Lloyd or Joe would choke and Mitts would pound on their backs until they were breathing again. Then she'd wipe the tears off their faces. She was happy all the time, Roy said, and that made Barkeep Charlie one lucky guy.

Jake's wife, Flo, was never, ever happy, according to Roy. He said she was a bitter and nasty woman, who made Jake miserable and nasty, which made Flo even more miserable. He called it a cycle and said it had to be broken. Roy talked about breaking cycles all the time. Roy said he had the key' to breaking the cycle of female unhappiness, but never had the chance to try it before the cycle broke itself, collapsed under its own weight. He was proud of my father for breaking the cycle of poverty he'd known in the coal mines of West Virginia by moving to Elmwood, New York, getting a good job in the gyp mines, and becoming the Moneybags we all know and love. The more beer he drank, the more Roy talked about cycles and how it was up to me, my responsibility, to break the cycles of ignorance, poverty, miserable women, and death to carry on the cycle of life. Usually Jake would rescue me before I got too confused to understand Roy's slurring. He would give me dimes to play the pinball machine and take Roy home to sleep it off. Jake didn't seem that miserable to me. He always had a pocket full of dimes.

One Saturday afternoon right after school let out for the summer, we went to get my annual buzz cut. On the way we dropped in to the Dew Drop Inn like we always did. After a few drinks with Dad, Roy was even drunker than usual. Because none of the other guys were there, we had to give him a ride home. On the way to the hotel, he fell asleep in the back seat.

"Slow down, Dad," I said and reached over the back of my seat to steady Roy's head. "You're hurting him." Each time we went around a curve to the left he fell sideways and his head banged up against the window. It went back up straight on the right-handed curves, forward when we stopped, and straight back when Dad took off again.

"He don't feel a thing," Dad said. "I'm just trying to wake him up." He stepped on the gas and the big LTD jerked ahead, ripping Roy's head out of my hands. "Feel that power, boy? That's a Ford, all right."

I climbed over into the back seat and held Roy's head still. The bumps on his skin from the old burns were turning purple where they had hit the window. I rubbed them gently like I was petting a dog. He nuzzled me back and said, "Gracie." I felt sorry for him because he was so disfigured from the accident at the steel plant that he'd probably always be alone. The scars still had to hurt, especially where the skin was stretched so tight across his cheeks but Roy said they didn't hurt him on the outside anymore. He said he was numb.

"Help me get him up the first steps," Dad said when we got there. "Then you wait in the bar while I take him up."

"I'll help you take him up," I said. I opened the door and climbed over Roy to the sidewalk. "I want to see his room."

"You will wait like I told you," Dad said as he tried to lift Roy out of the back seat by gripping him under the armpits.

Roy came to and grabbed Dad's jacket: "Don't make the boy wait in the car, Bags."

"I won't, old buddy," Dad told him. "Come on now."

"He'll get tired 'of waiting," Roy said. "They all get tired of waiting, you know. The kids, the women, they won't wait forever."

"Hush now, Roy. You're home," Dad said. "Son, grab the door." Between the two of us and with a little help from Roy himself, we got him up the first set of steps and headed up the next.

I went in the bar while Dad put Roy to bed. Roy rented a room over the Elmwood Hotel, and I really wanted to see it. I'd been to all the other guys' houses. Joe lived in a big, fancy house up the road from the Dew Drop. Lloyd lived over in Indian Falls on a little farm with lots of kids and animals and a dog that was so well trained it killed on command and then buried its victims in the backyard. Jake lived in town by the car wash, and he had the coolest deerskins hanging on the dark paneled walls and over every piece of furniture. All I knew about Roy's room was that it was upstairs, he shared a bathroom with two other tenants, and I had never seen it.

I figured if the upstairs of the Elmwood Hotel was anything at all like the downstairs, Roy's room would be one interesting place. The hotel was a monument to all the great hunters in the area. Dad even knew two of the famous men. He'd been in Korea with Shorty Miano, the great hunter who shot the moose that hung over the men's room door. Everyone knew the story of how he had killed it up at Lake Lila and brought it all the way back in a one-man canoe. Dad also knew Mikey the Moose, who I always thought should've killed the moose, but he actually snagged the twelve-point albino deer overlooking the pool table. That the kill was out of season was a minor technicality, and Mikey finally won the legal right to display the White Buck. How could he just let the elusive beast go when every hunter in the four county area had been chasing that buck for over ten years, and there it sat pretty as you please in his yard eating out of the bird feeder? On each wall there hung old ten- and twelve-gauge shotguns, black powder

horns, framed photos of the famous hunters, and even some bows and arrows stapled onto a buffalo skin hanging in the back. There were hundreds of stuffed animals, not the toy-kind like girls play with, but the real kind that people like Shorty and Mikey killed and had preserved for all time. There were pheasants, rabbits, turkeys, mink, and beaver that looked alive except for their unblinking eyes. I never sat down in the hotel; I just wandered around and looked at all the cool stuff.

That day Jake, Joe, and Lloyd were sitting at the round table playing bar room crazy eights. Their faces were shiny with sweat, and Jake's button up shirt stuck to him. I could see the hair on his chest and back right through the wet material. "Well, if it isn't little Moneybags Junior," Joe hollered. "Have a seat, kid. Long time, no see." He shook my hand. His palm was all hot and sticky, and he didn't squeeze very hard at all, the way dad had taught me. "Nice grip you got there," Joe said.

"I thought they were going to teach you to stay off of bars in the hospital there," I said, and it made Lloyd laugh and get beer on his gas station uniform. It was the first time anything I said made someone spit beer out his nose, and I was pretty proud, like I was one of the guys or something. I couldn't wait to tell Mitts.

"No, kid," Joe said, "it's not the bar. It's the beer, but they gave me medicine to take. If I drink a beer, it will make me sick as a dog."

I wanted to know more, but Lloyd smacked him and said I didn't need to hear that kind of shit. I told them that Dad and I were on our way to the barbershop as soon as he got done tucking in Roy. Jake said Lloyd would cut my hair for half price and winked at me. Lloyd said he would do it for free because he cuts all his kids' hair rather than throwing good money to a bad barber. Joe said Lloyd didn't know what he was talking

about and would like to see him try. Dad came down and said he'd let them do it and buy a round if they only had some clippers. The next thing I knew I was sitting on a barstool in front of the window wrapped in a red-checkered tablecloth staring at the moose.

Lloyd shaved my head bald as a cue ball with a pair of sheep shears they found in the trunk of Joe's car. I couldn't believe Joe had clippers in the trunk of his car. He had lots of other things, too, as I discovered when they sent me outside to put them away and play with anything I found interesting. I found a yo-yo. It got boring after a few minutes because I didn't know how to do any tricks, but I did find a slingshot to play with in the parking lot. I got pretty good at hitting the elm tree on the *Welcome to Elmwood, Population 2501* sign out front. The tree on the sign was the only elm tree in Elmwood due to an outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease a few years back. Judging by the size of the dents I left on it, it wouldn't be around much longer either. I was getting so accurate that I could probably take out a beaver or a raccoon with just one rock. If I got an eagle, I could have it stuffed and put in the hotel. I'd be famous. I decided to ask Joe how much he had to have for the slingshot.

That was Joe's newest scheme, buying stuff cheap and selling it for more. He was always trying to get Dad to go into a new business with him, so he could get away from working for his father-in-law and make his own money. He said he wouldn't even need to drink if he had his own money. Once he almost had Dad convinced to open a garage with him, and Joe even went ahead and had a building put up on his property. It never happened though because Joe's wife, Rose didn't like all the guys hanging around, the zoning people wouldn't give them a permit, and Dad said he'd be a fool to lose out on his pension. Security, he said, that's the name of the game when you were poor once and

never wanted to be poor again, even if that meant putting up with ten more years of nightmares about the mines collapsing on him. Joe filled the garage with junk. He put a sale sign out front whenever he was home, and sometimes customers would stop by. He would have had better luck with whistling. Joe could whistle better than anyone I knew. Someday I was going to ask him to teach me to whistle like that.

Finally I went back in the hotel because it was getting dark, and my shaved head was getting cold. Roy was up from his nap playing cards with Dad. Joe whistled along to a Hank Williams song on the jukebox, and Lloyd slept in the corner. He spent more time sleeping in the bars than drinking because he said it was the only place he could get any rest. I felt bad that he had to work two jobs now to support his family since Bethlehem Steel had shut down, one at the Minute Man Gas Station and the other as a janitor at my school. Dad said not to feel bad because you just do what you've got to do. It was way past supertime, so Jake bought me a hamburger and fries. The burgers are better at Charlie's than at the hotel, but I didn't complain. I knew Mitts would cook me a burger at Monday night's euchre game.

The phone rang and all the guys laugh and said, "If that's for me, I'm not here." It was Lloyd's wife, and she talked so loud, he held the receiver a foot away from his ear. We couldn't understand the garbled words, but the anger came across loud and clear. "I've got to go," he said. "That god-damned woman is going to drive me to drinking."

Joe quit whistling long enough to call for bets on who would be the next one to get a call.

"You boys better appreciate what you got before it's gone," Roy said. "Go home to your wives."

"For what?" Joe asked. "So Rose can tell me what a failure I am? So I can look at her fat ass sitting on the couch, watching *Dialing for Dollars*? I'd rather look at your ugly ass, Roy. No offense meant to your fat ass, Jake."

"None taken. I know exactly where you're coming from, my friend," Jake said and pointed a fat, hairy finger at me. "That little guy over there has more hair on his head than my Flo. She even wears that wig to bed now." Flo had been bald ever since their &on Bobby died five years before. Some say it fell out, and some say she pulled it out. Either way, it never grew back in. Jake told us once that hair isn't the only thing missing from her head. "Besides," he said, "Flo knows better than to call me here. I wear the pants in my family."

Joe was the next one to get a call, and he told Rose he'd be home when he was damn good and ready.

"I'm telling you guys to straighten up or else you'll be sorry," Roy said.

"Come on, Roy. Lighten up, and I'll buy you a beer," Joe said. "If I'm going to catch hell for being in a bar, I might as well catch hell for drinking, too." I wondered about his quit-drinking medicine, but I never got to see if he got sick because we left.

As we were walking out the door, I heard Roy say we'd talk again on Monday.

Monday night was euchre night at Charlie's Village Inn where they usually had two tables going. Dad said back in the old days, when Mikey the Moose, Shorty Miano, and other local heroes were still alive, there were five, sometimes six tables going at one time. That night there was only one game going because Lloyd and Junior didn't show up. Joe figured it was woman trouble keeping them. If it's not your mother giving you a

hard time, Joe said, it's your wife, and God help the man who has to deal with both. Barkeep Charlie and Mitts had to sit out. That left Dad partnered with Jake playing against Roy and Joe. I sat in the corner booth with Mitts, watching the action and filling up ketchup bottles and salt shakers. I tried to understand the game and follow the bowers, but the rules seemed to keep changing.

Joe's quit-drinking medicine must not have been working because he was drinking one beer after another. "Hey," he said, "I never got to thank you guys for sneaking in that brewsky to me at the VA. You are the best friends a guy could have."

"Jesus Christ!" Dad said. "His skinny ass is getting sloppy on us already. Hey, Barkeep Charlie, you gotta cut Joe off. Rich man can't hold his alcohol."

"I ain't as rich as you, Moneybags," Joe said. "Look at that nice car you bought yourself and those shiny new choppers. I've never really bought myself anything. I married into my money, my job, everything."

"That's right," Dad said. "Your Rose was raised with a canopy over her bed while my wife was raised with a can of pee under hers."

All the guys laughed at Dad's joke, except for Roy.

"Joe married up, and I married down." Dad was on a roll, talking real loud, his face getting red and shiny. "When I found my wife, she was living in a shack on the top of a mountain in West Virginia, so far back in the woods that they had to pipe the sunshine in and the moonshine out." All the guys laughed, and Dad stood up. "And poor? They still don't got indoor plumbing on that hill. Lucky they got electric. Shit, she was so poor as a kid she had to carry a hot potato to school' just her keep her hands warm. Then she had to eat it for lunch."

"My ass," Jake said, laughing-so hard his cheeks and belly shook "I suppose it was ten miles to the school, too, and she walked barefoot, in the snow."

"You know it," Dad said, his new false teeth sparkling. "And it was uphill both ways, too. The schooling didn't last long, though. That's why she's so dumb. Her mother passed her in the third grade, and her father made them both quit. Shit, that woman can read tea leaves better than she can read the newspaper."

I couldn't believe my ears. Dad always told me to never talk about our women in front of the guys. He said it was disrespectful. Mom might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but no one would have ever known she didn't finish grade school if Dad hadn't told the guys. Mom was a hard worker too, which was a good thing because Dad always said that there's nothing worse than a lazy woman who keeps a dirty house. Why didn't he tell them that our house was always clean? The landlord always said so when he came to collect. Why didn't he tell them how Mom had worked nights and weekends washing dishes so my sisters could have nice weddings? Mom always said her goal in life was to raise good kids and see them graduated from high school. She'd done it, too. Both my sisters finished school and had husbands. I even had a niece, which no one my age could say, and I was turning out okay so far. Sometimes I didn't listen to Mom, and she'd make me pick a switch off the lilac trees so she could spank me with it. Dad never hit me, but Mom would grab my arm and switch my bottom, asking me the whole time if I was ready to mind her, to respect her. I ran around her in circles like a tetherball on a pole crying, "Yes! Yes! I'll mind you. I'll mind you." Sometimes I'd hide in the cornfield all day to avoid a whooping, but Mom would just wait and give it to me when I got back.

"Your mother is a good woman," Mitts said, and I felt guilty, as if she could read my mind. "I met her once when she came in to get your father for your sister Becky's wedding. You were just a baby then." She touched my cheek and sighed. "Come in the kitchen with me." She gathered up the ketchup bottles, and I carried the salt shakers. "What'll it be tonight? Hamburger? Ice Cream? What?"

I chose ice cream because Mom had left dinner for us before she went to work. "Mitts," I asked, "What happened to Roy's wife? Did she leave him because of his face?"

"No, she didn't divorce him if that's what you're wondering," she answered.

"No, I didn't mean that," I said. "I don't even know what that is exactly."

"It's when people decide they don't want to be married to each other anymore," she said. "It's starting to happen more and more, now. Liz Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, they both divorced more than once. Movie stars do it all the time."

"But, no one we know would get divorced, right?" I asked. "Only movie stars and people like that?"

"No, it can happen to anybody," she said. "Carmen's been divorced for years." It all made sense now. I'd always wondered why Carmen was so quiet and unhappy. She had probably been a famous movie star before she moved from Hollywood to Elmwood.

"What a prize that Dan Sr. was," Mitts said. "Let me tell you. He was huge, even bigger than Jake, and he had a huge, filthy mouth too. And mean?" She sighed. "At least Carmen got the bar and Junior in the settle--"

Mitts bit her lip and shut up, like she'd said too much.

"I won't tell anyone, Mitts," I said, and she nodded. "Tell me about Roy's wife. If it wasn't a divorce, then what happened to her? Will you tell me? Please?"

I didn't think she would tell me, but I gave her my best puppy face until she said, "All right." I smiled. Maybe I was finally learning how to handle women.

"Her name was Grace," Mitts said. "I met her the day she died. She was a religious woman, a saint, really. She took care of Roy for years after the accident. He started drinking here during the days after they told him he couldn't go back to work at the mill. They could've given him something besides a measly check, something for him to do. Anyway, Grace would never come in the bar, but she would call for him once in a while. I hate the calls the most. I always say, 'He says he's not here,' and then they have to talk to them. Your mom called here for your dad the night you were born. Lloyd's wife called here for a couple of her kids, too. The worst call was the one from Flo when little Bobby died." Mitts stared off for a minute before she started to tell me the story again. "Grace didn't drive either. In fact, the only women I know who can drive are me, Rose, your rna, and all the rich women, and I don't really know them because they think they're too good for me. Anyway, Roy had to take her into Batavia for groceries once a week, and one time he decided to stop in here for a quick one because he was just passing through and all. By that time Roy would get the shakes if he didn't have his juice in him by mid-morning. It was a freezing cold day, and he left Grace sitting in the car. He drank and drank. I kept reminding him about his wife in the car, but he said he'd go when he was damn good and ready. I even went out there and begged her to come in.

'No, thank you,' she said, real polite and everything, 'but if you could tell my husband to

take me home, I'd be very grateful. Our little girl is home alone, and I don't like to leave her for too long.' Then she smiled at me. I didn't even know they had any kids."

"Me either," I said. "What's she look like?"

"Who, the daughter?" Mitts asked. "I don't know; I never saw her, but Grace had a beautiful smile. She smiled at me when no other woman in town would even talk to me."

Barkeep Charlie yelled into the kitchen, and Mitts jumped up. "Mitts! Watch the bar for me, will you? Junior and Lloyd are here with a bunch of other guys. We're gonna play some euchre."

She walked out, and I followed her behind the bar. "What's everyone doing here?" she asked.

"Lloyd said the hotel closed their doors," Barkeep Charlie said.

"For good?" Mitts asked.

No," he said. "Just on Mondays. Not enough customers to be worth it."

"Tell me about it," Mitts said. "We haven't had a Saturday off in twenty years, and look how much we made this past weekend. Or should I say didn't make?"

"But now, we're the only bar in town open on Monday nights," he told her.

"Business will be hopping. Come on, Mitt. Fetch us another pitcher, would you?"

When Barkeep Charlie went to his table and Mitts started filling the pitcher, I begged for the rest of the story.

"Shhhhh!" Mitts whispered. "She just got tired of waiting. She decided to drive herself home and drove off the Water Street Bridge instead. Grace smiled at me, and ten minutes later, she was dead."

Then Mitts just walked away and started joking with the guys like it had never happened. I lay down in my usual booth in the corner and covered up with the blanket Mitts kept there for me.

"So boys," Mitts asked, "how was church yesterday?" They all looked at her and cracked up laughing.

Joe said he went every other Sunday whether he needed it or not.

Dad said, "My ass! They lock the doors when they smell Joe coming."

Jake said, "The last time I was in a church was when they tied on the old ball and chain." That got such a laugh that he kept going. "The bald ball and chain, I should say."

"Now, she can't help that," Roy said.

"She can't help herself. She's crazy. I'm telling you," Jake said and laughed harder even as everyone else got quiet. "She makes Bobby a birthday cake every year. Can you stand it? Wait. Wait. That's not even the best part. Last night I went to have a piece of it, and she threatened to cut my heart out with the cake knife."

Roy shook his head. "She's obviously not happy," he said.

"Not happy?" Jake said. "She's fuckin' nuts. I tell you. She was gonna kill me. I had to smack her in the face just to calm her down. Shit! I had to do it. You guys understand. Don't you?"

"Sure, I do," Lloyd said and walked over to put his arm on Jake's shoulder. The keys on his janitor uniform jingled as he moved. "My old lady drives me crazy, too. She made me plant a garden big enough to feed an army. That's why I was late. She had me

pulling weeds as soon as I got home from work. I sneaked away when she wasn't looking just so I wouldn't have to hear her mouth."

"I have heard about enough of this 'shit," Roy yelled. He banged the table so hard it's a miracle it didn't break. "You are all making your wives miserable. You have to break the cycle before it's too late."

"It's not like they have it so bad," Jake said.

"Yeah, we work to support their asses," Lloyd said and looked around at the other guys. "Don't we provide for our families?" They all nodded their heads.

"Listen to me. Women need companionship. They've got to have it," Roy said. "If they can't get it from you, then they need to make some friends. Look how we all have each other. Who do they have?"

The guys said their wives had sisters, mothers, children. Roy said they needed more than that, and if they didn't give it to them, they would all be sorry.

"It's not like they're going to divorce us, for Christ's sake," Dad said. I thought about what I had heard about Carmen, and I began to wonder if maybe their wives could divorce them after all. They should listen to Roy before it was too late. "My wife said if I don't quit drinking, she was leaving me as soon as the kids got through with school," Dad said. "Though I don't believe she'd do it." I couldn't believe it either, but if Dad said she said it, then she must have meant it.

"Well, you still got one kid to go," Joe laughed. "Then you're on your own." "It's obvious he doesn't want to be alone," Roy said. "That's why he had such a late life baby."

"Hey, I didn't make that kid alone," Dad said. He folded his arms across his chest. "She couldn't make it out there without me."

The guys said 'that's right' and "I'd like to see her try" and they need us too much to leave us."

"Dottie said that she was divorcing me if I didn't buy her that god-damned farm," Lloyd said. "I should have called her bluff. Now I'm stuck with a gentleman's farmette, whatever the hell that is. I ain't no farmer."

"And you sure as hell ain't no gentleman," Roy said. That made-everyone laugh, but Roy wasn't ready to give up yet. "Seriously, I think it would be great if you get all the women together." That made everyone laugh harder. It would never work, they said. Rose was rich. Mom was poor. Flo was crazy. Carmen was anti-social. They were different ages., Their children were different ages. Mitts worked. Dottie didn't. What would they talk about? ·They had nothing in common.

The arguments went on like that for a while until Lloyd finally left. He said if he was going to get bitched at, he might as well get bitched at at home. Mitts took his place at the euchre table, and I fell asleep in my booth. I dreamed of Roy's wife driving around in a big Ford LTD like Dad's. She had Mitts, Carmen, Dottie, Rose, Flo, and even Mom in the car with her. They were all smiling and driving down Water Street with Bobby's birthday cake all over their faces. I thought of it as a good sign.

I woke up like I always did when Mitts called, "Last call for alcohol." I noticed Lloyd was back. After listening a while, I finally figured out what had happened while I was sleeping. Like the ends of Mitts's jokes, I always missed the good stuff. Lloyd had gone to leave earlier, but his headlights weren't working. Dad and Joe tried to fix them,

but couldn't. Lloyd drove all the way home with his arm sticking out the window holding a flashlight on the white line. When he got there, Dottie gave him such a hard time that he turned around and drove right back the same way.

"Are you going to drive home that way again, Lloyd?" I asked.

"Nah, the batteries are about dead," Lloyd said. "I'm dead too when I get home."

"You bring it all on yourself," Roy said. "You don't even try breaking the cycle. You-"

"Finish your beer, Roy, and I'll take you home," Jake said. "I gotta get up in four hours, and I want to have Flo make me something to eat before I hit the hay. I'm starved."

"You're all headed for a divorce," Roy said.

A vision of Mom all made up like Carmen came into my head. How would she live without Dad there to pay the bills? Jake started to say something, but I cut him off. "You guys should listen to Roy," I said, and they all just stared at me. "I mean, why don't you have that get-together for everyone like you were talking earlier? It would be fun. I could play with Lloyd's kids." I looked at Lloyd to help me.

"Well," Lloyd said, "Dottie has been complaining that I never take her and the kids anywhere."

"I've heard that one before," Joe said. "Over and over and over."

"We need to do something to get them off our backs," Lloyd said. "Anything."

"Come on, Dad. Jake?" I said. "What do you say? Joe and Lloyd are in." I gave Jake the sad face I'd used on Mitts, but it didn't seem to be working. "Please Jake? I won't spend anymore of your dimes."

"Oh, hell," Jake said. "I don't give a shit. I'm going home." He pushed himself off the chair by pressing his hands against the tabletop, groaning all the way up. "You coming, Roy?"

"Yeah," Roy said. "Just a sec." He looked at Dad. "Are you in too, Moneybags?"

"Come on, Dad," I said.

"We'll see," Dad said and I could tell he was getting upset with me. I shut up.

"Good, then it's settled," Roy said, getting up from his chair. "We'll figure everything out later." He followed Jake out the door, and Joe left after him. Then we left. I never did find out how Lloyd got home.

I was excited. This get-together would make everybody happy again, Roy said. No one really knew how to pull off such a big thing, but they let me help because I had helped Mom with my sister Sue's wedding that past spring. Picking out a date was a hassle. It took almost two weeks, what with everyone's work schedules and vacation times to work around. I reminded Dad that we were going to West Virginia in July, and he just grunted and said he wasn't wasting his vacation time in the sticks. Barkeep Charlie argued against having the party on a Saturday, but Roy convinced him that he wouldn't go broke if he closed the doors for one day. Besides, Joe said, Rose would never agree to it if they were drinking beer on a Sunday. Finally it was settled; the party would happen the weekend before Labor Day weekend.

Every time the guys got together after that it was to plan the big party. We were interrupted all the time. Joe was in the VA Hospital for a week in July after he smashed

up another car. He should've been dead, by rights, but he came away with a broken ankle and his sixth broken nose. Joe was one lucky guy. He felt so bad about holding up the plans that he offered to have the party in his garage.

I suggested that Mitts make her famous hamburgers, and everyone thought that was a great idea. I said she made great ice cream sundaes, and they went for that, too. I felt like one of the guys; they even started calling me Bossman. It was all starting to come together. We decided to have a big barbecue with all the wives and families. Mitts could do all the shopping, cooking, and make all the picnic salads. All of us guys pitched in money for pop and beer and food. Mom gave me a small allowance for taking out the trash and gathering the eggs from the coop, and I donated the whole thing to the cause. Joe was so impressed that he gave me the slingshot I'd been saving up for. Besides, I already had it pretty well used by that time, and he could've never gotten the \$3.00 he wanted for it anyhow.

One Friday night about a week after Joe got out of the hospital we were at the Dew Drop. All the guys were sitting at the bar talking to Junior about a new roof. I wanted to figure out what we were going to do at the party besides eat, but I was playing pinball instead. Jake had slipped me three dimes, and told me if I paid attention to the game, I could probably make them last an hour. The sound didn't work on the pinball machine, so I could hear everything the guys were saying. Junior was talking a lot that night, arguing with them, saying that Carmen just wanted to patch the bad spots.

"You can't do that," Dad said. "The whole thing's bad."

"You should put a new roof right over top of the old one," Joe said. "Flat roofs ain't no good for this area, what with the snow and all."

"It's the best way," Lloyd said. "That's what I did with the coop." He reached over and grabbed a pen out of Jake's shirt pocket and started drawing on a napkin. They decided a small bam-shaped roof with asphalt t-lock shingles would be best. All the guys said they'd help with the roof; even Roy wanted to work off some of his tab. Joe couldn't do much because of his broken leg, but he told Carmen he'd supervise and tell anyone who fell off the roof that he was fired before he hit the ground. All the guys laughed, but Carmen just nodded her head.

My dimes were all used up in less than a-half an hour, and I wanted to talk about the party. I walked up behind Roy's stool and saw the headlights of a car pulling in the gravel lot. Everyone turned around to look because it was pretty rare for strangers to drop in. Mom walked in the door.

"What are you doing here?" Dad asked her. All the guys turned back around and stared into their glasses of beer. I couldn't stop watching because I'd never seen Mom in a bar before.

"No," Mom said. "What are you doing here? You know we were supposed to leave for West Virginia when I got done with work."

"Well, you're out early," Dad said. "Besides, we ain't going."

I couldn't believe it. That trip was all Mom had talked about for the last week, and all our clothes were clean and packed in laundry baskets by the door at home so we could leave first thing in the morning. Mom just looked -at Dad and didn't say a word.

"It takes over twelve hours to get there and then twelve more to get back," Dad said. "That's better than a day driving. You know I only get one week off a year."

"I ain't seen my mother since Daddy died three years ago," she said. "And she needs our help. I hear tell the place is falling down."

"It was falling down twenty years ago, too," Dad said. "Besides, a vacation means no work."

Mom lowered her voice and I had to lean in close to hear her. "You promised me. And if you don't take me, I'll take my son, in my own car, and go without you."

"Your car won't never make it there and back," Dad said.

"As long as it makes it there," Mom said. "I don't care if it makes it back."

We left, and on the way out the door I heard Jake whisper to Joe that Dad was in the shit house now. Mom made me ride home in her car, and we left for West Virginia before it was light out.

Mom and Dad didn't talk the whole way there.

West Virginia was okay. My grandma baked me lots of cookies, and I dunked them in milk from her own cow. I got to see Dad use a stick of dynamite to blast a hole in the rock for the new outhouse, and I helped him build it, too. The new outhouse had a flat roof on top, but I didn't say anything. I thought it was kind of funny that Dad and I really were in the shit house, but I didn't say anything about that either.

Dad and I couldn't wait to get back to Elmwood. Dad couldn't wait because Grandma wouldn't let him drink beer in her house. He would go to the bars down there every night after supper, but all his friends were back home. The worst part was Mom wouldn't let me go with him. It's just like a woman never letting a man do what a man's got to do. I had to get back home and see how the party plans were coming along.

Mom and Dad didn't talk the whole way home either.

The Monday night after we got home we headed to Charlie's as soon as Mom went to work. It was pretty quiet even though everyone was there except Jake.

"Hi, Guys," I said. "Where's Jake? We've got a lot to do."

"Hey, Bossman. Come here." Roy called me over to him and put his arm around my shoulder. "Jake died the day after you left. I'm sorry." Just like that.

I didn't say anything, so Dad said, "You've got to be shitting me." But they weren't shitting us. Jake's heart gave out, and he died in his sleep.

It was the first time ever that a friend of mine had died. I wanted to cry but knew I couldn't. I yelled at them instead for being such assholes by not calling us to go to the fucking funeral. Who gave two shits that they didn't have the number? I didn't want to hear their sorry ass excuses. It was the first time I ever swore in front of anyone, and the guys laughed and said I did it like a trooper. Only Mitts told me to watch my mouth; she didn't understand my pain like they did.

"We'll run right over there and pay our respects to Flo," Dad said but didn't move.

"I guess the party is off now," I said to say something, anything other than how I couldn't believe I'd never see him again or ever again feel his big, hairy hand put a dime on mine.

"No, we can still have the party," all the guys said. "Don't worry." They seemed as desperate as I was about me not crying.

"Why don't you invite Flo to join us?" Roy said. "I'm sure Jake would've liked that. We'll still have the party."

Dad and I drove around the corner to Jake's house. The first thing I saw was a deer head staring out at me from the top of the trash can. It was surrounded by all of Jake's deerskins. If Flo didn't want them, she should've donated them to the Elmwood Hotel. Jake could've been famous. Flo came to the door and let us in. The house smelled like hot cookies and fresh paint. She had new curtains on the windows and flowered slipcovers on the furniture with matching throw pillows. She didn't look crazy, and she didn't look sad either. She told Dad thanks, but she didn't need anything. I guessed not. The man had barely been dead a week, and there she was redecorating the god-damned house. Like Dad, I just said I was sorry for her loss, but she seemed more sorry for ours. We left without inviting her to the party.

I still missed Jake, but the guys dragged me back into things through planning for the party. We spent the first weekend in August cleaning out Joe's garage. Joe and Lloyd started slipping me dimes on the sly. I had the best friends. Roy and I earned ten dollars and two rounds, two Cokes for me and a shot and a beer for Roy, by vacuuming all the dead animals in the hotel. I even shined their eyes with vinegar and water. I should've done the white buck first because the dirty water left dark circles around his eyes, but we decided it just gave him more character. We dusted and talked about the party all day. Roy said the wives would be less isolated and lonely after the party. It could be the start of something big. They would see what nice guys we all were and quit bitching so much about the time we spend together. It was a win-win situation. He told me in secret that he was sending an invitation to his daughter. I asked Roy about her, but he didn't want to talk about it.

Carmen agreed to let us store all the food in her cooler because it was so close to Joe's house. Actually, she didn't say we could, and she didn't say we couldn't. According to Dad, it was a situation of mind over matter: if she don't mind, it don't matter. Roy nabbed some tablecloths from the hotel to cover all the picnic tables we borrowed from the park. They wouldn't miss three picnic tables for one or two weeks. Barkeep Charlie and Mitts were letting us use the dishes and silverware from their bar. Lloyd and I were going to make a tossed salad with vegetables harvested from his giant garden. Everything was coming along great. We worked together like a baseball team set to win the World Series. We were ready. The big game would take place at three in the afternoon in Joe's garage on the last Saturday in August.

That Saturday dawned dark and stormy. I was frantic. What if the weather didn't clear up? How would we play kickball and lawn jarts? We hadn't made plans for the rain. Mom and Dad laughed at my panic. Mom said she wouldn't miss it for the world and tweaked my nose like I was a baby. Dad got mad and made me apologize when I slapped her hand away. Couldn't they understand how nervous I was? I wanted everything to be perfect, and there it was raining buckets.

It quit raining at noon. The sun came out at one o'clock. By two my parents finally agreed we could leave. I bounced up and down in the back seat of Dad's car on the way there. I didn't want to be late. We had to slam on the brakes to avoid running over Joe in the middle of Route 77 in front of the Dew Drop. We jumped out and helped him out of the road. He looked awful, and he smelled like beer and piss.

"Where are your crutches?" Dad asked.

"They're gone," Joe said. "Everything is gone. Rose left me and took everything but the house." In the parking lot we stepped around piles of lumber and stacks of green shingles as we helped Joe inside. Junior said that Barkeep Charlie had already taken Joe home twice, and twice he'd crawled back across the road. Mitts helped Joe to a table.

"What about the party?" I asked. "Can we still have the party?" It didn't look good. Joe was like I'd never seen him before, and Roy was at my usual corner table with rows of empty shot glasses stacked in front of him. Junior was emptying buckets of water from the leaky roof and telling Carmen to find the number to the roofing company so he could call them up and ream them out.

"I can't go, Bossman," Roy said. "My little girl thinks she's too good to come see her old man." He called for Junior to bring him another shot. "After all these years, she still blames me." Roy started crying silent tears. It was the first time I had ever seen a man cry, and it wasn't pretty. How unfair of his daughter! It's not like Roy told Grace to drive his car off a bridge.

Mitts took Mom off to the side and introduced her to Carmen. The three women talked quietly in the corner. I thought it was a good sign that we could save the party. I almost fainted with relief when Lloyd walked in with a bushel basket full of vegetables. He wore blue jeans and a tee shirt; it was strange to see him out of uniform.

"Hey, Lloyd," I said.

"Hey, Bossman," Lloyd said and ruffled my hair. It grew back pretty long for as short as he had shaved it.

I started unpacking the vegetables and asked, "Where are your kids, Lloyd?"

"They're home," Lloyd said. "Some of them kids are still in diapers, so I couldn't take care of them myself."

"Where's your wife?" I had to ask.

"Dottie's not feeling too well," he said. "She's in the family way, you know."

"Again?" Roy gasped and sputtered. "Can't you keep your pecker in your pants?"

"It's in there more than you think," Hoyd said. "Every time I take it out ..."

"Hey! Hey!" Dad came running over. "That is enough of that talk." He nodded towards Mom. "There's a lady here now."

Lloyd apologized and nodded his head to Mom. I kept unpacking the vegetables. We had the stuff; we should have the party.

Joe sTurnbled over to us and picked up a giant cucumber. "This is me," he said.

"If that was you," Barkeep Charlie said, "Rose wouldn't have left your sorry ass."

"When she got done with me," Joe said and held up a shriveled green pepper, "this was me." All the guys cracked up. Mitts laughed. I even thought I saw Carmen try to smile.

Dad came over and grabbed my arm. "We're leaving," he said. "Let's go."

"But, Dad," I said, "what about the party?"

"There isn't going to be a party," Dad said. "We're leaving. Now!"

"No!" I looked around for the guys to help me, but they were all staring at the bottoms of their glasses. "This is all Rose's fault. If she hadn't left Joe, we'd still be having our party. She'll be sorry. That bitch ..."

Dad smacked me hard across the face.

When I got up off the floor, we left without saying goodbye. That day Dad quit drinking. I blame Mom for making him give up all his friends. I lost all my friends, too. I will never let a woman do that to me again.

Roy was found dead in his room on Labor Day. Mom wouldn't even let me go to the funeral because I had to go to school. I should've known she wouldn't understand about Roy and me. In my heart I thought Dad would make her see, but he didn't. He didn't even go to the funeral himself. Dad gave up everything for her, and I never thought of him as one of the guys again.

Zero Visibility

Jason rocked the car, spinning the Barracuda's tires in drive, then reverse, then drive again, but it was no use. They were stuck in a snowdrift in the middle of Podunk Road. "We're definitely not going anywhere," Jason said, and next to him Ashley said she could have gotten them out before he'd made such big ruts in the road from spinning the tires. "I've been driving way longer than you," Jason said, "so don't tell me--"

"Just let me try," Ashley said and slid over into the driver's seat when Jason got out to push.

He'd left the window down, and snow stung the side of Ashley's face, making her eyes water. She stepped hard on the gas pedal, and the car whined.

"Stop pushing so hard on the gas," Jason screamed. "You're redlining it."

"Give me a break," Ashley hollered back, her words lost in the howling wind. She didn't bother to yell back that she was the one who'd told him what redlining was in the first place. He may have been driving longer than she had, she thought, but she'd learned more about cars from being the only child of a master mechanic than he ever did being the only boy in a family of women. Hell, she smiled to herself, remembering the words of her father, she'd already forgotten more about cars than he'd ever know.

Her father had been gone for four years, and for the first time she felt glad that he wasn't there to see them driving such a beautiful vehicle on salt-covered roads. Every self-respecting classic car owner drove a winter bomb-everyone, that is, except for them. Jason had originally wanted to buy a house, but Ashley had talked him into buying the car instead, and they'd both grown to love it-a 1967 Plymouth Barracuda, fire engine red with a slant six engine, dual exhaust, and a four-barrel carburetor. It had taken them two years of steady work to restore that car to mint condition, with Ashley teaching him everything her father had taught her about auto mechanics.

Starting from when he was 12, Jason used to help his mother with her tailoring business after his father died. That skill had come in very hand when they'd restored the interior of the car. He had replaced the headliner and reupholstered the seats using his late mother's heavy-duty sewing machine.

One of their favorite mock arguments used to be who would get custody of the car if they ever got divorced. Ashley sighed to herself, wondering if they might have to truly answer that question one day soon.

Ashley stuck her head out the window. "Jason," she yelled, the wind taking her breath away, "get back in the car before you freeze to death."

"You're not driving it right," he said, approaching the window. "Why don't you try pushing for awhile?"

"Why don't you just get in the damned car?" She rolled up the window and cranked the heat full blast.

Jason climbed in the passenger's side. "It's colder than a witch's tit out there," he said, rubbing his hands under the heater.

Ashley turned on the radio and faced the window.

After a few minutes, Jason pulled her over to him. "I'm sorry, baby," he said. "I just want you to be happy. I want us to--"

"Now is not the time to talk about what you want," Ashley said, not wanting to get in another argument with him. Since she'd finished law school six months ago and begun studying for the bar exam, Ashley felt as if they'd been seeing too much of each other. For the first three years of their marriage, she'd gone to school during the day, and he'd worked as head chef at Chez Henri on weeknights and Saturdays, leaving her plenty of time to do homework. The few hours they could find together were always stolen, always exciting, bursting with sexual tension or news they hadn't had a chance to share with each other. On Sundays, their only full day together, they'd worked on restoring the Barracuda in her father's old garage. After the car was finished and her course work completed, he was always there, always underfoot during the day, taking away her study time, causing her to fail her first attempt at the exam. She pushed his heavy arm from around her.

"I think we should go to that house over there and call for help," Ashley said. "It's lucky for us that we got stuck here. It's probably the only house on this god-forsaken road."

"No, there's another one farther up," Jason said. "It needs a lot of work, but it's for sale. I got the key from the realtor, and I thought if you liked it?"

"That's why you dragged me away from my studying? You wanted me to look at a house in a blizzard?" Ashley heard her voice rising and fought to control its volume. "Are we going to that house for help or what?"

"Let's wait a little while longer," Jason said, and Ashley knew he didn't want to leave their car stuck in the middle of the road for a snowplow to hit it. "A guy out in Montana was stuck in his car in a blizzard, and he survived by cutting open the seats and wrapping himself in the foam," he said.

"You would cut open these seats after sewing on every button?"

He shrugged. "Probably not, but I'm just saying people will do anything to survive. Look at--"

"Shhhh!" Ashley said, turning up the volume dial. "The radio said there's a travel ban. I can see having an advisory, but a ban? I can still see that house, so it can't be that bad."

"Not that bad?" Jason echoed. "A boy up in Maine went out to take the dog for a walk, and they found him frozen to death only 15 feet from the house. This kind of weather can fool you. In the Blizzard of '77, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. It was that bad."

Ashley shrugged. She had just been a baby then, so she couldn't argue with what he said. Jason took every opportunity to emphasize the 12-year difference in their ages. Ashley thought he might feel incompetent next to her, so she let him have his little victory over her. Aside from cooking, in which, of course, Jason excelled, she was far more intelligent than he was. Any idiot could see that they would eventually run out of gas and have to go for help, so she determined to sit in silence until he came to his senses.

When the car sputtered and stalled, the last of the gas gone, Ashley tucked her head and arms inside her coat and tried to stay warm with her breath. The wind blew

through every crack in the car, swirling snow around it until the driver's side lay buried in a snow drift.

Jason shivered and watched his breath billow out in front of him in the frozen car. "I guess we should go to that house now," he said.

"It's about time," Ashley said: "If you'd listened to me in the first place, my toes wouldn't be numb right now."

"Let's just go," Jason said. He pulled on the door handle and pushed on the door, but it wouldn't open. He threw his shoulder against it, and the door cracked open a few inches, spilling snow on his head. He swore.

"Hel-lo," Ashley said. "Get out on my side. The snow isn't as deep over here."

"Don't talk to me like that," Jason said, maneuvering his long legs over the gearshift and sliding over next to Ashley. "You sound like a stupid teenager. Hel-lo," he mimicked.

"Don't talk to me like you're my father," she said.

"Like I would know how a father is supposed to sound."

"We have plenty of time to have kids," Ashley yelled. "You don't have to bring that up again." Jason had been pressuring her to buy a house and start a family, but she had been just as adamant about waiting a while longer. She wasn't even sure where she wanted to live for the rest of her life. She was only 25. Jason was 37, but she couldn't make him understand that men didn't have the same kind of biological clocks that women had. In fact, Ashley thought, Jason didn't have any kind of internal clock. He still looked young, wore his blond hair in a sleek ponytail, had a diamond stud in his ear, and had not one ounce of fat on his slim body. Ashley felt years older than her husband

because she was the only one who worried about everything. She worried about their bills, her student loans, her exam, and the fact that her period was late. She didn't know anymore if they had a future together, much less if she felt ready to be tied down for the next 20 years because of a baby.

"I was talking about because my father died when I was so young," Jason said, "but since you brought it up--"

"Forget I said anything," Ashley said and opened her door and stepped out into the blizzard.

Jason followed her, and they made their way in silence through the drifting and blowing snow to the small one-story house.

Jason pounded on the door, but no one answered.

"The lights are on, so somebody must be here," Ashley said.

"Just a minute," a deep voice said through the door. A short man with white hair, wearing dark blue work pants with a matching shirt, opened the door. The shirt was unbuttoned, showing a white undershirt stretched over a massive belly, and a circle patch over the left pocket of the work shirt said Bill. "What are you doing out in weather like this?" the man asked, pulling them into an enclosed porch.

"Our car got stuck," Jason began. "If we could come in? And use your phone?"

"Don't have a phone," the man said, craning his neck up at both of them. The man was barely five feet tall, and it appeared that his legs and upper body were of equal proportion: two and a half feet of body above the waist and two and a half feet of legs below. "What kind is it?"

"Excuse me, sir?" Jason said.

"Don't call me sir," the man said, smiling for the first time, his teeth short and spaced so that each one became visible individually. "I work for a living. Now, what kind is it? The car?"

"I don't see what difference--" Ashley said, bouncing from foot to foot and rubbing her hands together.

"It matters to me," the man said, cutting her off.

"It's a Plymouth," Jason said. "A Barracuda."

"Well, come right in," the man said, opening the inner door and stepping aside so they could enter the house. "A Mopar, huh? Well, I'll be dipped. Marge! Get in here, Marge."

Just inside the door of the small house, Jason and Ashley took off their boots and set them on the bottom of the small coat rack next to the door. It was a boxy living room with beige walls, carpeting, furniture and doilies. The only spot of color came from the knitted afghan thrown over the back of the sofa. The room was completely dust-free and smelled like Pledge.

"What is it?" a woman asked, running from what Ashley assumed to be the kitchen. She wore a blue dress printed with white paisley swirls, and it hung between her knees and ankles, shapeless except for the top where the material had worn thin from the constant rubbing of her massive bosom. She wore her hair, faded brown with a few gray streaks, coiled on the top of her head like a thick snake. "Who have we here?" the woman asked, smiling. "Weary travelers?"

"We're the Bentons," Ashley said, holding her hand out to the woman. "Ashley and Jason Benton. You must be Marge," Ashley continued when the woman didn't take the hand she'd offered. "Thank you so much for helping us."

"The husband should speak for the family," Bill said through his little teeth.

"Marge, take this young lady in the bedroom and get her some dry, appropriate clothing."

"No, thank you," Ashley said. "As soon as our clothes dry off, we'll be on our way."

"Don't be ridiculous," Bill said. "It's not fit for man or beast out there. The weather man said to stay in and hunker down; it could be the storm of the century."

"Ashley, just go change," Jason said. When she didn't move, he added, "Please? You're soaked through, and we won't be able to leave for at least a few hours."

"Or days," Ashley heard Bill say as she followed Marge down the beige hallway. "It was ten days before anyone moved when the Blizzard of '77--"

Marge motioned her into a dark, colorless bedroom and closed the door behind them. "Take off your wet clothes," she said, digging through a rack of dresses in the closet. "We can hang them in the kitchen to dry."

"My pants and socks are the only things wet," Ashley said. "If I could just borrow--"

"I think this dress will fit you," Marge said, ignoring her. "Probably a little big on top, but you know how it is. I used to be flat like you until I had my first baby. Then I just--"

Ashley interrupted, trying to convince the woman that she didn't want to wear one of her dresses, but apparently, Marge didn't own any pants. The closest she had, and

what Ashley ended up wearing, was a pair of green culottes, split in the middle like pants but full and long in the legs like a skirt.. They clashed horribly with the purple University at Buffalo sweatshirt Ashley had on and the fuzzy pink slippers Marge gave her for her feet.

The women walked back to the living room. The men stood by the door, layering winter clothes on their bodies. Jason wore brown Carhart coveralls, bright yellow rubber boots, and a black ski mask.

"Marge, Bill said, "wait dinner on us until we get back."

"Yes, sir," Marge said, nodding.

"Where do you think you're going?" Ashley asked Jason.

"We're going out to get the car," he said.

"Are you freaking crazy?" Ashley said. "You just said it's a blizzard--"

"Young lady," Bill said, pointing at her with a gloved finger, "there will be no cursing under my roof. Is that clear?" He continued to point at her. "Is it?"

Ashley stared at his finger, willing it to stop pointing at her. It didn't, so she nodded her head.

"Can't wait to see this thing," Bill said. "A '67, huh? It's probably older than you are, huh?" He slapped Jason on the back and pushed him out the door in front of him. Neither man looked back.

Ashley stared at the closed door, unwilling to believe that her own husband had allowed that man to talk to her like that. Her father would have never stood for that. Then again, like Jason, her father would have gone to get the car, too. Ashley sighed, thinking once more that her father wouldn't have had the car out in this weather at all.

“Pay no attention to Bill,” Marge said. “He’s not as mean as he makes himself sound.” Marge turned toward the kitchen and said, “Come on. We’ve got to get dinner ready before they get back.”

“If they get back,” Ashley said, looking at the snow blasting the window and following Marge into the kitchen.

“Wow,” Ashley said when she entered the room. “This is so retro.” The tiles formed a black and white checkerboard on the floor, and a chrome table with a faux marble top sat in the center of it surrounded by four chairs with red vinyl seats and backs. The refrigerator hummed in the corner with its rounded edges and separate pull down handles for the freezer and refrigerator sections. The stove bulked huge next to it, a white Westinghouse model circa 1940. The sink was pure white porcelain with a built in drain board. Even the rounded, chrome toaster shined in 1950’s style. Checked curtains framed the window, and striped dishcloths hung on a wooden clothes tree over the heat register. Everything sparkled. “Jason would love this.”

“Why would he care about the kitchen?” Marge asked, hanging Ashley’s clothes over the rack to dry.

“Because he does all the cooking. He’s a chef, you know.”

“He cooks for a living?” Marge asked and then busied herself in the cupboards, taking down bowls and ingredients, handing them to Ashley to set on the table. “Bill has never touched a stove or a pot in this kitchen.”

“Then he’d probably starve to death without you,” Ashley said.

“I’ve never thought of it like that,” Marge said, handing Ashley a tub of shortening. “Can you make biscuits?”

"I can try," Ashley said.

Throughout their dinner of beef stew and lopsided biscuits, Bill talked to Jason about cars, about gear ratios and the number of barrels on a carburetor. He talked about dual exhaust versus catalytic converters and about how he used to be the best mechanic in New York State until the car companies started installing computers in all their vehicles. Hoping to enter the conversation, Ashley brought up her father, but Bill said, "Never heard of him," and kept right on talking to Jason.

Bill talked about the blizzards of '77, '85, and '93. He told how they'd been stranded for days, and snowmobilers had delivered supplies house to house.

"I remember the Blizzard of '77 so well," Jason said. "I was 14 years old--"

Knowing what would be coming next, Ashley said, "I don't think you should be telling that story at the dinner table."

Marge gasped, and Bill turned to Jason. "I, for one," he said, "would love to hear your story."

"No--" Jason said, "Ashley's right."

"Tell me the story," Bill said, enunciating every syllable. "Now."

Jason looked at Ashley and shrugged. "My dog; Taffy was her name. Well, Taffy was really sick, shaking, vomiting, diarrhea, the works. I stayed up around the clock taking care of her, but nothing I did seemed to help. She was suffering horribly."

Jason swallowed hard, recalling the 23-year-old memory. "The vet couldn't get out to us, and we couldn't get out to the vet, either. Finally, on the third day, my mother called the sheriff's office to see if they could help us."

Bill and Marge hung on Jason's every word. "How awful!" she said. "Did they come and help you?"

"Marge, let the man tell his story," Bill said.

Ashley stirred the food around on her plate as Marge begged Jason's pardon for interrupting him.

"The sheriff came, all right," Jason said. "He came on a snowmobile, took one look at the dog, and shook his head. He said they couldn't waste valuable resources on a dog." Jason breathed heavily. "He took Taffy out in the driveway, and he shot her. He had to shoot her three times before she was finally dead."

No one spoke for a few seconds. Bill broke the silence by laughing a huge laugh that shook his big belly and exposed his tiny teeth: "That's why you should always have your own gun on hand," he said, "for emergencies."

The mention of guns set Bill off in a new conversational direction. He talked about deer hunting and target practicing, disgusted to find out that Jason neither hunted nor owned a gun. Bill talked about his two tours in Vietnam and the one man he'd had to kill out of mercy-just like poor Taffy.

When Jason asked if they had any children, Bill told him about his two sons. The sons were tall, good-looking boys who'd won many athletic awards in high school. Now they were missionaries in some heathen, matriarchal society in Africa, having great success in converting the natives to the true way.

Jason said they didn't have any children--yet.

The men took their apple pie in the living room and looked at photo albums of all the cars Bill had ever owned.

The women cleared the table and ate their pie in the kitchen.

While washing dishes, Marge said, "It's so nice that Bill has another man to talk to. He sees so few people now."

"What about the guys at work? My father always had a lot of guy friends from the garage."

Marge shrugged and continued washing the dishes. Ashley sighed. "What about you? Do you work?"

"I volunteer at the church thrift shop once a week," she said. "Besides, there's plenty around here to keep me busy. I clean a lot."

"I can tell," Ashley said. "Our apartment is absolutely trashed. We're both too busy. I just finished law school, you know. All I have left is to do well on the bar exam, and I can get a job practically anywhere I want."

"You're a lawyer?" Marge asked. "Bill can't stand lawyers."

Ashley shrugged. "Like anything else, there are good ones and bad ones."

"Oh, I understand, but Bill's another matter entirely. He blames the lawyers for not keeping our oldest out of jail," she said. "The boy was only 16 at the time, and boys will be boys. You know? Well, that's all over now, but maybe we shouldn't mention this to Bill?"

"Okay," Ashley said. She wanted to ask for more details, but decided she'd better not. Instead, she said, "Marge, do you think it would be all right if I smoked a cigarette?"

"There's no smoking in our house," Marge said. "'It's a disgusting habit."

"I'll just go outside, then."

"Bill won't like it," Marge said, drying her hands on the dishcloth. "It's defiling your temple."

"So's this outfit," Ashley said under her breath as she left the kitchen and went to the coat rack to get her jacket and boots. When Bill and Jason asked where she was going, she said, "Outside to smoke," and closed the door behind her.

The wind took her breath away; and the snow stung her eyes. She couldn't get the lighter to light in the blizzard conditions. She'd stepped back into the porch when Jason came out behind her. She lit her cigarette, and Jason told her she'd better not smoke on their front porch.

They stepped outside, and Jason blocked the wind so Ashley couldn't drag on her cigarette. "Bill is having a shit fit in there because you're out here smoking," he said.

"Watch your mouth, young man," Ashley mimicked. "There's no cursing in this house."

"He's a little old-fashioned, but he's okay."

"A little" Ashley said, dragging hard on her cigarette. "How could you sit still and let him treat me like that?"

"We're guests in his home," Jason said.

"I know, but I feel more like a prisoner," Ashley said. "I don't want to stay here." "Let's just humor the guy," Jason said, rubbing Ashley's upper arms. "We can probably leave in the morning."

"Can't we leave tonight? You got the car out and everything."

"But the roads aren't plowed, and we only have that little bit of gas that Bill put in. Let's be sensible, for a change."

"For a change?" Ashley said. "I'm always the sensible-one. I don't even have my books to study."

"I, for one, am glad," Jason said. "All you ever do is study. There's never any time for us anymore."

"Here we go. You're so selfish. You know my next test is in two weeks." She took the last drag off her cigarette and flicked the butt away.

They stepped into the little porch and cleaned the snow from their boots and coats before entering the living room. Bill sat in his beige recliner drinking a beer, and Marge sat on the couch knitting with dark green yarn.

"That's really beautiful, Marge," Jason said, sitting next to her on the couch. "Thank you," she said. "I'm making lap blankets for the nursing home."

"He doesn't care about that, Marge," Bill said. "He's just being polite."

"No, really," Jason said. "My mother taught me how to crochet. It's very relaxing. And I really like the color, too. I wanted to paint the car kelly green, but Ashley here won out with red."

"We had to keep it original," Ashley said.

At the same time Bill said, "There weren't any green Barracuda's originally." Ashley laughed and called "jinx," but Bill ignored her and told Marge to go in the kitchen and get Jason a beer.

Marge moved to set aside her knitting but relaxed again when Jason said he didn't care for any.

"What are you, a girly man?" Bill asked. "You got that ponytail and earring, and Marge tells me you're a cook."

"No, I'm a chef," Jason said. "Graduated from the CIA."

"You cook for the government?" Bill asked.

Ashley giggled and said, "That's the Culinary Institute of America."

"Don't patronize me, young lady," Bill said. "Marge, I told you to get Jay a beer.

Now, go."

Jason started to argue but changed his mind because Marge was already headed for the kitchen. Ashley also knew that he hated being called Jay, and, despite that, she knew that he would never correct the older man. She used to be so impressed with his good manners.

"Jason can't hold his alcohol," Ashley said and watched her husband turn red with embarrassment. "He's allergic." Whenever Jason had more than a few drinks, he blacked out. He never had any memories of the stupid things he'd done- things like walking down the middle of the road or yelling obscenities out their living room window. The last straw, the incident that had forced her to insist he see a doctor had been when they'd hosted a small dinner party for her friends from school. Jason had felt excluded from the conversation, drank too much wine, and pulled his pants down and told her guests, her future colleagues, that they could kiss his ass. The doctor had said that Jason was allergic to alcohol and that he should abstain for the rest of his life.

"I'll just have a little," Jason said and took the bottle of Labatt's from Marge.

"Whatever," Ashley said, folding her arms across her chest.

Marge jumped up and said, "Come on, Ashley. Let's go clean up the boys' old bedroom so you two can sleep in there. It may take us awhile because no one ever goes in there."

They went back down the beige hall, passed Marge and Bill's room, and entered into a brown paneled bedroom. Marge locked the door behind them. A small bathroom connected the bedroom to the one next door, and Marge went over and filled two Dixie cups halfway up with water. Then she closed and locked that door, too. She filled the cups the rest of the way up with vodka that she fished out from underneath one of the twin beds. She handed one to Ashley, winked and said, "You're not going to tell on me, are you?"

Ashley shook her head and raised the cup to her lips. The women drank and looked around the room. Like the rest of the house, the bedroom was neat and dust free. Their sons' books were still on the bookshelves along with stacks of magazines-*Mad*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *Outdoor Life*. Armadillo shells, turtle shells, fox skins, and two coon skin caps hung on the wall next to a gun rack with rifles lined up inside like soldiers. A compound bow with arrows leaned against the wall.

Ashley picked up the sole trophy in the room-*Seventh Grade Spelling Bee First Runner Up*. She said to Marge, "You must be very proud of your sons."

"They haven't written to me in two years," Marge said. "All grown up and they're still breaking their mother's heart." Marge sighed. "It makes Bill crazy wondering what could have happened to them. He's been even crazier lately."

"Being missionaries must be pretty dangerous," Ashley said.

"Missionary-mercenary." Marge refilled her cup with straight vodka. "What's the difference?"

Ashley held her cup out for more. "I'm surprised they didn't become great mechanics like their father," Ashley said. "My father was a mechanic."

Marge laughed. "Bill's no mechanic. He changes oil down at the Jiffy Lube."

"Oh." Ashley stumbled over her words. "I don't know what to say," she said, finally.

"You don't have to say anything," Marge said. "That's the best way. Now, let's strip these beds down and put fresh linens on them." Marge pulled the blankets off the first bed, and Ashley pulled them off the second. Marge sat on the bare mattress filling and emptying her little paper cup. "I sure do miss my boys," she said, looking around the bedroom. "They were always so loud and messy and tiring. I couldn't wait for them to grow up, but now, I'd give anything to have them back here with me." Marge sighed and raised her cup again. "You'll feel the same way once your babies start coming."

"I'm in no hurry for that," Ashley said. "I was thinking of waiting until my late 30's early 40's, at least."

"Oh, you'll be too tired and set in your ways to enjoy them," Marge said. "It's too hard to change after a lifetime of habits have set in." She got up to retrieve fresh bedding from the closet. "I should know."

"You're still young," Ashley said, making up her bed. "If you could do anything you wanted, what would you do?"

"I don't know," Marge said. "I never thought I'd have to wonder about that because I always thought that I'd have more babies than two."

"I bet you wanted a daughter?"

"Yes, but it's for the best. She probably would've broken my heart, too." She laughed lightly. "I bet it broke your mother's heart when you chopped off all your hair short like that."

Ashley shrugged. "It's my hair."

"Bill thinks it's unnatural."

"What do you think?" Ashley asked.

"I think we'd better have one more for the road," Marge said. She winked and smiled, and Ashley thought the smile, or the alcohol, made her look beautiful. Marge stashed the bottle back under the bed and threw their cups in the wastebasket in the bathroom. She took a swig from a bottle of Scope in the medicine cabinet and then unlocked the door leading to their bedroom. "Are you coming?" she asked.

Ashley said, "Sure, maybe we can play a. game of cards or something to pass the time?"

"We'll see what Bill says," Marge said and led the way back down the hall.

"I quit smoking seven years ago when I was 30," Ashley heard Jason say as they walked back into the living room.

"Hi, honey," Jason said, patting the spot next to him on the couch.

"Yet you still allow your wife to smoke?" Bill said, not even acknowledging their presence.

"I can't tell Ashley what to do," Jason said. "You know she's almost a lawy--"

"Jason, can I get you another beer?" Marge asked.

"Marge," Bill said, his face reddening, "you will apologize right now for interrupting our guest."

"No, it was nothing," Jason said. "Sure, Marge I'd love another beer."

"Do you really think you should?" Ashley said quietly. "Remember the last time?"

"Marge!" Bill stood up, glaring at his wife.

"I'm very sorry for interrupting you, Jason. I'll go get you a beer. You too, Bill?"

"That's more like it," Bill said, sitting back down. "Bring us each two." Then he turned to Ashley. "And if your husband wants to have a few brewskies, then it's his right, so you -"

Ashley stood up. "I don't know who you think you are talking to me like that."

"Ashley, shit down," Jason said, already starting to slur.

Marge hustled in from the kitchen carrying four beers and handed two to each of the men.

Jason laughed. "One for each hand."

Marge sat down on the end of the couch and pulled Ashley down with her.

"I'm the man of-this house," Bill said. "Tell her, Marge. Tell her how I won't have any woman, or anyone else--"

"It's true," Marge said, shaking her head up and down. "This is just like when the boys were home. I always had to be the peace keeper." She shook her head up and down, repeating to herself, "just like when the boys were here." Her hair came loose from its coil and unraveled down to her waist.

"You have beautiful hair," Jason said. "Ashley had long hair when I met her. God, how I loved it, how I loved her." He sighed and guzzled from the bottle in his left hand. "Wouldn't want the other one to get jealous," he laughed and guzzled from the right hand bottle. "I forgot how good this stuff tastes."

Marge jumped up off the couch and said, "Ashley, come with me to fix my hair."

They went back to the boys' old room again and drank more vodka. Several times Ashley started to say something to Marge, but what could she say? Jason was right that they'd have to make the best of it. Still, he shouldn't be so stupid as to drink and risk embarrassing them. Why couldn't he stand up to anybody but her?

When they returned to the living room, both men were watching a documentary on battleships. Jason was singing, "We all live in a yellow submarine," and holding onto two fresh beers.

"Shouldn't we be watching the weather?" Ashley said.

"Just did," Bill said.

"Snow, snow, and more snow," Jason said. "Now, we all live in a yellow submarine, a yellow submarine."

"Marge," Bill said, "after you take care of the empties, you can go to bed, if you'd like. Jason can keep me company tonight. He says he's a night owl, too."

"We thought we could play a game of cards or something," Ashley said when it became obvious that Marge, who was already picking up the empty beer bottles, wasn't going to bring up the subject.

"I don't feel like playing any more games with you," Jason said and burst out laughing. "Remember when we used to play strip poker, just the two of us?"

Ashley stared at him.

"I want to watch this program," Bill said. "Good night to you, then, girls."

"Good night," Marge said.

Ashley stood there still staring at her husband. "Jason?"

"Oh, yeah. G'night," he said and blew her a kiss.

Marge went into her room, and Ashley went to hers. She had a night cap, straight from the bottle; and fell asleep to the sound of Jason singing in the living room.

When Ashley woke in the morning, there was no sign of Jason. She wasn't even sure if he'd come to bed last night. She sat up and reached for the clothes she'd folded next to the bed and was attacked by a sudden bout of nausea. She just made it to the little bathroom in time to vomit in the toilet. After she felt a little better, Ashley cleaned herself up and put her clothes back on. She wished she'd thought to wash out her underwear and grab her jeans off the rack the night before. She made the bed and looked out the window. She got angry when all she saw was the snowy whiteness and all she heard was the howling wind.

Ashley headed down the hall and saw that the living room was empty. She heard voices in the kitchen, so she quietly walked to the coat rack. If she could sneak out and have a cigarette without anyone knowing, then she wouldn't have to put up with the dirty looks she'd gotten the last time. She put on her coat, but the cigarettes were not in the pocket where she'd left them. She checked all her pockets, and they were gone.

Ashley stormed in the kitchen.

Marge stood by the stove frying bacon. "Good morning," she said. "Why are you wearing your coat?"

"I wanted to have a smoke, but they're gone."

"Your husband threw them away last night," Bill said from his chair.

"You didn't!" Ashley turned to Jason, who was buttering toast. He shrugged.

Marge hustled over to Ashley and put her arm around her. "Come to the table and get some breakfast. Here, have some juice." She pushed Ashley into a chair.

"Do you have any coffee?" Ashley asked.

"No," Bill answered for her. He pointed at Ashley. "Caffeine is a drug, and there are no drugs allowed in this house."

"For your information," Ashley said, "alcohol is a drug. And I want you to quit pointing at me; I don't like it." She turned to her husband. "Jason, where in the hell are my cigarettes?"

"I honestly don't know. I had a lot to drink and--"

"Don't speak to your husband in that tone, young lady," Bill said.

"My name is Ashley," she yelled. "Don't point at me anymore, don't call me young lady anymore, and don't tell me how to speak to my husband. I will speak to him any way I want, and if you don't like it, then you can just kiss my ass."

Bill reached across the table and slapped Ashley across the face.

"You son of a bitch," she said and lunged across the table.

Jason grabbed Ashley by the waist and set her behind him. "You've got no right to touch her like that."

"This is my house," Bill said.

"Bill, please," Marge said. "They're our guests." She put her hand on his shoulder and gently directed him down into his chair.

He rested his face in his hands. "Tell I won't put up with this."

"We're leaving, anyways," Ashley said. "Thanks for everything, Marge. Jason, let's go."

"But the blizzard?" Jason said. "Come on, don't be foolish."

"You," Ashley said, starting to cry, "are an asshole."

"There she goes with that filthy mouth again," Bill said.

"I can't believe you're letting him treat me like this," Ashley said to Jason as she stomped over to the clothes rack and yanked off her jeans and socks.

"I can't believe *you*," Bill said to Jason. "Last night you were mister man, the tough guy, ready to take back control of your family. Today, you're buttering toast like some woman. I told you to let Marge do it."

"You don't have to be so mean to your wife," Jason said. "I would never treat Ashley like that. She wouldn't stand for it."

"I don't have to live with her," Bill said. "You do."

"That's no way to be," Marge said.

"You just shut your mouth," Bill said.

"Bill, can't we all just get along?" Jason asked. "As soon as the storm is over, we'll leave and you'll never have to see her again. How's that?"

"I'm out of here, now," Ashley said and walked into the living room.

Jason followed and walked over to the coat rack where she was changing into her jeans. "Please calm down," he said. "If it weren't for Bill and Marge, we'd be frozen to death."

"I'm supposed to be grateful?" She finished buttoning her pants and tucking them into her boots. "Hurry up. Get your stuff on."

"We can't." Jason reached out to touch her.

"Fine," Ashley said, stepping out of his reach. "You can just stay here with your new friends. You get along with them better than you do with my friends."

"It's too dangerous. Don't be stupid."

"You're the stupid one," Ashley said, stepping out onto the porch. "I'm leaving this crazy fucking house."

Jason followed her and grabbed her by the arm. He stumbled over his words, took a deep breath, and tried again. He let go of her coat sleeve and rubbed his bare arms. "You'll freeze to death out there," he said.

"I'll freeze to death here, too," Ashley said, and she opened the door leading outside. The wind swirled snow around her, and the blizzard's welcome whiteness took her breath, smothering her with its icy purity.

RoxRocks

Snorting Sammy has got himself one powerful nose. It's got so much suction he can sniff off the spoon on one side without even plugging the other. Usually I fill the bottom of a plastic straw for him and hold it up to his nostril, and that son of a bitch takes such a massive snort he puts Hoover and Kirby both to shame. There's nothing handicapped about that nose. He has other, more personal parts of him that work, too. I know because sometimes when I sit real close to him or lean over to whisper in his ear, he throws me and any of the guys who happen to be there out of his room. Then he calls for Pete, who threads the catheter back up Sammy's cock after its twitching spits the plastic tube out.

The piss bag hangs by the side of the bed, hidden by Sammy's electric wheelchair. Every day, I sit in the chair and keep him company ever since he got bedridden a few months back. Don't get me wrong. I'm no Florence Nightingale, and it kind of creeps me out to be sitting in his wheelchair, like I'm tempting fate or something. But, how long could this last? A little blood in the bag, he'd said, no big deal. Still, who wants to be wheeling all over Batavia with a bloody piss bag hanging off the back of his chair?

It's a small room, so I either have to sit in the chair or stand there. I don't think I could stand anyway because sometimes we go on for days and nights, listening to Sammy's collection of classic rock music and snorting coke. We crack up laughing every time Steppenwolf sings *God Damn the Pusher Man*, and Pete and Sammy always say, "We ain't related, but we do be brothers" every single time the Doobie Brothers come on. We get so wired we have to smoke some joints to bring us back down, and then we snort some more coke so we don't burn out.

Every few days when we run out, Sammy's nurse, Pete, shows me the door. He's so considerate, saying that the apartment is no place to be when the dealer man comes around. I probably already know the man, might have already done him, but I just leave and thank Pete for his consideration. I figure they're getting their stuff from Rob, and I don't want to see him anyway. Like every other girl in Batavia, I used to go out with Rob, but he dumped me because I was snorting up too much of his profit. I don't see how that could be true because that son of a bitch always had an eight ball or more in his pocket. I know he could afford me. The man was a marketing genius, advertising with a big custom painted eight ball right on the hood of his Trans-Am.

After Rob dumped me, I became even closer to Sammy. We were always running into each other, and he'd wheel his chair around the dance floor at McNichol's Pub or Backhoe Joe's with me on his lap, his clenched hand moving the lever back and forth in time to the music from the jukebox. Then Sammy took to the bed, and I started spending almost all my time at his house. I've changed, finally mellowing at the age of twenty- five. It's like Pete and I are working together to help a great guy. Sammy calls me his angel helper and says he doesn't know what he'd do without me. I haven't been to the

bars hardly at all or slept with anyone since I started hanging with Sammy and Pete.

We're like the three amigos: Roxanne, Pete, and Sammy.

Lately, I always go straight home from Sammy's, sneaking around the back of Full Belly Deli to check the driveway for the car. If it's gone, then Mom and the kid don't see me, and I can take a shower and try to sleep a few hours. If she hides the car in the garage and I get caught, I spend my time fighting with Mom about how she doesn't want to raise my son anymore. Then, she ends up leaving the kid with me just to save herself a few bucks on day care. She rarely catches me anymore because I've got it timed. She leaves at eight to drop the kid off and get to her job at the mall at nine, and I'm pretty careful to come home after eight. In the summer I sometimes get confused and go home at night thinking it's morning because of the daylight savings time shit, but now I've learned to ask *a.m. or p.m.?* when someone tells me the time.

If all goes well at home, I get some rest and come back to Sammy's house and we do it all over again. He needs a lot of help even though he has some limited movement in his thin arms. Pete takes care of business like showers, meals, and money, and I take care of recreation. Sammy could never roll a doobie, so he needs me to hook it up to the clips and hold it up to his mouth. I also cut up his lines, and sometimes I even get the small baggies of coke or weed out of the closet and give them to the guys after they've paid Pete for them.

My mother and a lot of other people think a lot of things about me, but they don't know shit. I'm trying to help Sammy live as normal a life as he can, and I've got myself a plan, a major goal in life. I'm going to snag a husband, and I already got him picked out. Someone kind and gentle, someone who can take good care of me. Usually, I never

meet men who are like that. I never usually meet new men at all, and the ones who know me--well, let's just say we don't want each other anymore. When we were teenagers, we'd all hang out at the Wreck, a junky tree house in the woods by the Sand Wash. We'd party hearty and skinny dip and have some harmless making out or heavy petting. Once, I blacked out from washing down too many valiums with Yukon Jack, and the next day I heard that I'd done every guy there. They passed me around like a joint, some of them double hitting.

We're all older now, and those times are in the past--for me, anyhow. I thought changing my ways would give me a fresh start, but once your nickname goes from Foxy Roxy to Gutter Woman, it sticks in people's minds, right around the edges like coke rings on nostrils or those tiny little rocks that stick to the hairs up there and fall out on your shirt when you're laughing. People around here are generally mean to me, even if they've never talked to me. They all know I had a baby without having a husband, but they never take into account that I was almost twenty-two when Bradley was born, not some stupid teenager who got herself knocked up. All the women in town are jealous of me like they think just because I have a great body and dress to show it off that I'm automatically after their men. I can't help it if it's the other way around:

Aside from Pete and Sammy, I only ever met one really nice person; and she was a doctor, but I think if I can find a man like her, then I'll be all set. I'm thinking Pete is that man.

That nice doctor lady was the one who told me I had cancer two years ago. She was so gentle and kind and didn't treat me like a piece of meat like the doctors at the clinic where I used to go when I had an infection or those couple of unexpected

pregnancies. That fat man in Buffalo didn't even wear gloves when he examined me, and man, was he rough. But that lady doctor, she didn't hurt me or make me put my legs up wide in cold stirrups. She put my feet right in her lap and cooed to me and shushed me as she touched my swollen stomach with fingers so soft I hardly knew they were there. The pain in my stomach was unbearable; it was all puffed up huge like it was when the kid was born, but there was no kid in there. I was swollen and rotten from infections and cancer. The doctor looked inside me and said, "honey, you're lucky to be alive" and "you poor baby girl" and clucked her tongue and said she would take care of me until I started taking care of myself.

Mom didn't even come to the hospital when they scraped out all my insides, said she was too busy paying for my mistakes and now it was my turn. The doctor sent a driver for me the whole time I got radiation treatments because Mom said she couldn't take time off from her job to drive me to the hospital.

The last treatment made me radioactive, and I had to stay in my room away from everybody for thirty days. I couldn't use the same dishes or toilet or air that anybody else used for fear of contaminating them with radiation. Mom locked me in my room with a five-gallon bucket to use for a toilet with a specially made seat that slipped inside the bucket and latched to the outside of it. She left my meals outside the door on paper plates with plastic silverware and brought me gallons of water to wash with. I stacked garbage and dirty laundry in the corner of my room until I could deal with them when my thirty days were up. Mom didn't get me a television to watch or let me have a phone to use. The nicest thing she did was put a grocery bag full of Harlequin Romances outside the door and tell me she didn't want to hear me crying about being bored again. She also

brought me the want ads and one of those catalogs full of men in Alaska advertising for wives to come and keep them warm.

That's family for you. I was possibly going to die, and she was more concerned about nagging me through the door to get either a husband or a job with her at the mall when the treatments were over. Like I want to stand there for eight hours a day and squirt people with perfume. One day when I was really pissed off, lonely in my room, and jonesing for cigarettes or a beer or anything to take the edge off, I told my mother she's the one who smells like a whore at the end of the day. I said how dare she judge me when she didn't know who my father was either. None of her alcoholic boyfriends ever claimed me as a daughter.

She sued for guardianship of Bradley while I was locked in that room thinking about dying, and things haven't been the same between us since.

I have a substitute family now. Pete lives with Sammy and takes such good care of him it makes me tear up to think about how he'd be with a wife and kid. Pete thinks we all make fun of him behind his back because he's a nurse, and some of the guys do say things like he must be queer or call him a ball washer. I never do because I think it's the bravest thing to change what people think you should be. He's so huge and strong that he should be a bouncer down at Backhoe's or something, but he's a nurse instead. Now that's brave. It's easy to be what people think you are. I mean I had a bad reputation and some people still say nasty shit about me, but hanging with Sammy is nothing compared to some of the things I've done to get fixed up with a snort or two. Don't get me wrong, I've never been a junkie fucking for fixes, and I never shot up in my life. But people still bring up the ancient history at the Wreck. It's totally unfair because

it's not like I'm actually doing Sammy or anything. I'm just a concerned friend visiting while he's laid up, indulging in some recreational drugs, and planning how to get Pete to marry me.

Pete does all the cooking, and sometimes I try to help him in the small kitchen. We can't help but rub up against each other on account of the handicapped accessible kitchen being so small and so low that we have to bend over to reach everything. While Pete cleans up the kitchen, I feed Sammy his supper. He usually only takes a few bites, but he offers me an extra half gram if I make it look like he's eaten more. I get me a meal, a half-gram, and a smile from Pete because no one can make Sammy eat like I can make Sammy eat.

"You ought to go to nursing school," Pete says to me as he's marking on Sammy's chart that he ate a whole plate full of Chicken Parmesan. It was delicious enough to have been made in a restaurant, but I can't tell Pete that.

"I'm not smart enough for nursing school," I say, happy that he thinks I am. "I never even graduated from high school."

"Roxanne," he says, "you shouldn't be wasting your life here."

I'm so flattered that he cares that I can't think of a thing to say. I think Pete needs a woman to help mellow him out, to soothe his tension. While working around the house, he worries so much about the cops busting in or someone ripping off Sammy that guys have started calling him Paranoid Pete. He kind of asks for it, going around singing--I'm being followed by a moon shadow, moon shadow, moon shadow--and looking over his shoulder all the time. Lately, he hates to answer the door or the phone, even though that's part of his job, so I jump up and answer them just to save him the

stress. A big guy like him, who carries Sammy to the shower like he doesn't weigh but a pound, who beats so hard on Sammy's back and chest every morning after exercises to loosen the phlegm, you'd think he wouldn't be afraid of anything. I don't think he's afraid for himself, though, or he wouldn't make me leave when they're expecting the man.

I also volunteer to sit with Sammy when Pete goes grocery shopping or runs to the pharmacy. When my energy level gets up there so high that I get the feeling that I'm going to tweak out like I used to do before I changed my ways, I grab the vacuum or the dust rag and clean the place up. The more I do around there, the less Pete has to do. I'm making myself indispensable to him. I try to do enough of his work so that he has some spare time to break out his guitar and sing. He only knows two songs: *Moonshadow* and *I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane*, and both of them make me sad to think of losing Pete.

Pete sighs: "I've got a lot of leftovers. How about joining me for a plate in the kitchen?"

I'm full up to the top, but I can't believe Pete is finally showing an interest in me. I follow him to the table and we sit down under the fluorescent lights.

He nods to the empty spot. "That's where Sammy used to wheel himself up to the table before he became confined to bed," he says. "It's been six months, and he's not getting any better."

"After he has enough money for the surgery, things will get better." I take a bite of chicken. "This is great stuff." I say. "You could be a professional cook."

"Thanks," he says but doesn't eat any of his food. "Too much time has elapsed since the initial injury for surgery to be an option, so it's doubtful that Sammy will ever walk again. He could lead a fairly normal life, though, if he quit doing the drugs."

"He does them because he's trying to lead a normal life," I say. "You told me that yourself."

"But he does too much. There's no self-control." Pete does his fair share of partying with us, but he draws the line at fixing up Sammy. An ethical dilemma, he says, even the professional.

"He really cares about you," Pete says. "Only you can make him eat, and I bet you could make him give up the drugs if you tried. If you loved him--"

"Hold up there, Pete," I say. I lower my voice and start to tell him that as much as I love Sammy as a friend, he's just not an option for me, but I don't get the chance because Sammy's calling for me from his room.

"After dinner doobie time," he yells. "Roxy, I want you to get your ass in here and roll one up, and you better look damn good doing it." He laughs at his joke.

"Talk to him," Pete whispers and takes my half-eaten plate right out from under my nose. His concern for Sammy is so strong, he forgets his manners.

"Thanks for dinner, Pete," I say. "My mother always says you should eat where you loaf. Maybe I could cook for you sometime?"

"Sammy would like that," he says on his way to the kitchen.

"Sammy would like to smoke a goddamned joint already," Sammy yells from his bed.

So I fix Sammy up with a big fat spleef, and he makes fun of my rolling abilities, saying he's going to replace me with a better joint roller as soon as he finds one. I laugh with him, toking on the joint and then holding it up to Sammy's mouth so he can get his hits. I Call Pete to see if he wants any, and Sammy grows serious. He relaxes again when Pete says he doesn't want any. It seems like all the motion from Sammy's body has transferred itself to his face. I'm thinking it's like facial gymnastics, a huge double twist smile with a surprise frowning dismount.

"I'll give it an 8.5 for the little falter, before the dismount," I tell him, laughing.

"What the-fuck you talking about, girl?" Sammy asks.

I tell him what I was thinking and he says I'm cut off "How many times do I have to tell you, Roxy? You've got to start working with your drugs."

"Don't you think it's kind of funny? Just a little bit? The way your face just--"

"My face is all I got left," Sammy says, so sad and serious that I crack up laughing again. He says, "God, you're a piece of work" and starts pouting. "Brush my hair for me?" he asks, but I can't stop laughing. "Come on, Roxy. I got a 'g' of snow I'll do up with you."

I laugh and tell him I still have that half-gram he gave me for eating his dinner, but I brush his hair for him anyway. It's long, close to the middle of his back, brown and wavy. He keeps it, or I guess I should say Pete keeps it, pulled back in a ponytail at the base of his neck. I pull Sammy up and prop the pillow midway down his back so I can reach his hair. I run the brush through it until his hair is full of static and his moaning makes me uncomfortable.

"Go out there and send Pete in," he says. "When we're done, I'll call you in and we'll party."

As soon as I step out of the bathroom, Pete says, "You leaving?"

"No, Sammy needs you for something."

"You probably popped his damn catheter again," Pete says and slams Sammy's bedroom door behind him. Pete must be jealous, a good sign for me.

When the door opens back up over a half-hour later, Sammy has fresh sheets on his bed, and the room smells like a mixture of Clorox and Scope.

"All cleaned up and nowhere to go," Sammy says.

"You won't be going anywhere but the hospital if you don't mellow out," Pete says, walking past me with an armload of dirty sheets.

"Like you're a freaking angel," Sammy says to his back. He nods to the wheelchair. "Sit down, Rox. Let's do a few lines."

"Three fat ones coming right up," I say.

"None for me," Pete says, coming back to the doorway. "I'll be in my room if you need anything."

"What's eating him?" I ask Sammy. I can hear Pete strumming his guitar at the other end of the apartment.

Sammy shrugs with his face and tells me to hurry up with those lines.

Sammy and I party almost all night long. Sammy does up his whole gram with me, and I end up breaking out the half he gave me earlier because you can't get too much of a good thing. It's a quiet night with no visitors for a change.

"Where is everyone tonight?" I ask, sitting on the side of his bed putting the empty comer of a baggie on the tip of my tongue. The cocaine residue numbs it a little bit, so my tongue feels big in my mouth.

"Pete told them that I'm only dealing on Friday and Saturday nights now," Sammy says. "We can't have people coming and going at all hours. It doesn't look good."

"No one would suspect you," I say, removing the plastic from my mouth .and tossing it in the ashtray I've set on the arm of Sammy's chair.

"It's not just me," Sammy says. "Let's not forget Paranoid Pete, my partner in crime."

"Pete's your nurse and your friend, right?"

"How do you think I can afford a nurse? Did you really think he was taking care of me out of the kindness of his heart?" Sammy asks.

I shrug.

"Pete gets the stuff and cuts it up. Then, I sell it and he pays the man. After I pay Pete's salary, we split the profits."

"Still," I say, "you guys are above suspicion. I mean, a nurse and a cripple dealing weed and coke?"

"We're not called cripples anymore, Roxy," Sammy says. "God, you're so--"

"Politically incorrect?" I ask, sounding a bit like Elmer Fudd with my fat tongue.

"Yeah, that, and you're kind of sexy, too," he says, smiling at me. "Why don't you give me a kiss?"

"Sammy, you're my best friend in the whole world," I say. "I don't want to ruin that. Besides, if you cut down on your dealing, how will you be able to afford the operation? Doesn't it cost like a hundred grand or something like that?"

"There's no operation to help me," he says. "My spinal cord was crushed when I dove in that water, and that was five years ago. The doctor said I wasn't -a candidate."

"But, I thought you said--"

"Those were just pipe dreams," Sammy says. "Just something to keep me hoping, but now ..." He shrugs with his face, nose, mouth, eyebrows going up and then slumping down again.

"Oh, Sammy," I say and lean over to kiss him lightly on the lips. "I'm so sorry." I feel the tears coming to my eyes because I so wanted Sammy to be whole again. Like Sammy, I know I'll never be whole again, but at least the whole world can't tell at a glance that I'm not right on the inside, that I'm hiding from a cancer that could return any minute, or that I'll never have any more children. I rest my head on Sammy's shoulder while I pull myself together.

I feel Sammy lean his head down and kiss the top of my hair. "Lay with me for a little while" he says. "Just for a minute."

I rearrange my legs more comfortably on the bed, parallel to his.

"Help me put my arm around you," he says, so I slide down and hold his hand around my shoulder. "This is nice," he says, and we fall asleep like that.

I wake up with my leg thrown over both of Sammy's legs, my jeans covered in bloody piss, and Pete staring us down.

"Rough night, you two?" Pete says, startling Sammy awake. "Roxy, go home."

"What time is it?" I ask, sitting up on the edge of the bed. I jump up when I realize I'm sitting on Sammy's arm. "Oh my god, I'm sorry," I say.

Sammy says, "Shit, I didn't feel a thing." His face is red, and, he's not looking at me. "Maybe you should be going so I can get cleaned up. I'm really sorry for the mess and--"

Pete says, "That's nothing, Sammy. Don't worry about it." Pete turns to me and says, "It's seven o'clock, that's seven a.m." He grabs me by the arm, hands me my purse from the floor, and walks me to the door. "See you later, Roxy," he says and shuts the door behind me.

I have to pee really bad, but I don't dare go back in the apartment. Pete looked pretty mad at me for some reason. Obviously, my plans to get Pete to marry me are going nowhere. I shiver in the cool morning air and then laugh to myself, thinking those Alaskan guys are looking better and better. I'd probably still be in bed right now snuggled under a warm quilt next to a warm body. Then, we'd get up and eat breakfast in front of the picture window in our log cabin, holding hands and admiring the beauty of pure white snow blowing across the frozen ocean.

I decide to go home and get myself cleaned up. I walk the mile home down Washington past the Mall. Broken beer bottles litter the parking lot behind McNichol's Pub, so I can imagine what a wild night it was. I turn down Main and then up Swan past Backhoe's. The bar lights are still on, so I know they locked the doors and pulled another all nighter in the back room. If I didn't look so bad, I'd consider going in there to kill some time until Mom leaves. I keep walking and pass Chuck's Place on the corner. No

one goes there anymore since the bikers took it over. Like me, they have a bad reputation, but they're really all right kind of people. I hung with them for awhile when I was dating that big guy named Tuba. Tuba was sweet, driving me to Letchworth on his Harley for picnics or up to the lake for Friday night fish fries at the Black North. He was very generous with his drugs, too, not like Rob who always expected something in return. I probably could have married Tuba, but deep down I guess I'm just not biker bitch material.

I cross Ellicott and cut behind the Full Belly Deli to check the driveway. Mom's car is still there, but I can't wait another minute to go to the bathroom. I'll just have to deal with it. I try to sneak in the door, but she's on me before I'm all the way in.

"Where the hell have you been?" she says as I walk past her to the bathroom. She's slapping together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the kid's lunch. "We haven't seen you in days. You look like hell, and you smell bad."

"It's good to see you too, Mom," I say as I slam the bathroom door and lock it behind me.

"Mommy, mommy, mommy," the kid screams outside the door. My mother is Bradley's legal mother, but she still insists that he call me Mom and her Grandma.

"I'll be out in a minute, honey," I say to him, taking my pants off as I pee. They're stuck to my legs and hurt a little when I peel them off.

"Hurry up," Mom is saying through the door. "I want to talk to you before I leave."

"Mommy take me to the park?" I hear as I'm trying to scrub my legs with a wet washcloth. I dry them on a towel and look for something to throw on. There's nothing to wear, and I really need a shower.

"Roxanne! Can't you hear that child talking to you? Are you going to answer him? Or are you going to ignore him as usual? Roxanne! Can't you hear me talking to you?"

"Goddamn it, I hear you already," I yell back to her. I wrap the towel around my ass and whip open the bathroom door. "What!"

The kid takes off crying down the hall to his bedroom. "Now look what you've done," Mom says. "Some mother you are. Bradley, honey," Mom yells down the hallway. "Come to grandma. Grandma's not mean to you like your mother is. Come here, honey."

"Mom, I'm going to take a shower," I say, starting to close the door..

She- sticks her foot between the door and the jamb to keep it from closing. "Are you planning on taking care of Bradley today?" she asks and barely waits for an answer. "I didn't think so," she says before I even say anything. "The doctor called, which is what I wanted to tell you. She says you haven't been in for any check ups- in almost a year. Is this true?"

I shrug. "I feel okay."

"You'd better call there today and make an appointment," she says. "Start taking some responsibility for yourself for a change. You know I'm not always going to be here for you. I can't keep doing and doing for you, giving and giving--"

"Here we go again," I say.

"Well, if it would ever sink into that thick head of yours, I wouldn't--"

"Don't you have to go to work or something?" I say, trying to avoid another fight. I just want to live peacefully, but she's always on me, always riding me, like I'm a little kid or something. I'm almost twenty-six years old, and I don't need to be treated like this. I slam the door as soon as she moves her foot.

"Call the doctor," Mom yells through the door. "You hear me? Roxanne? You better call her, and you better be here when we get home. I mean it. I'm not taking care of Bradley tonight. I already raised my kids--"

I turn on the shower to drown her voice out, and the house is empty when I get out. I blow my nose, and small chunks of cocaine mingle with the snot on the toilet paper. What a waste. I take a couple of cold tablets to clear my nose for later, and they make me tired. I sleep until three. I wake up and make a pot of coffee and eat some toast. There's never anything good to eat in Mom's house, and I wonder what Pete is cooking for us tonight. I throw a quick bag together with a toothbrush and a change of clothes, and I leave before Mom and the kid get home at five.

No one answers the door at Sammy's place when I pound on it, so I sit on the edge of the ramp to wait for them to get in. I wonder where they could be because I know that, aside from the doctor's office, Sammy hasn't been anywhere in almost six months. If he had an appointment, he would've told me, so Pete probably left Sammy inside while he ran some errands.

I check the door, and it's locked.

If Sammy's in his room, he's probably lonely. I know how unbearable it is to be stuck in a small room with no company, and I'm glad that at least Sammy can have

visitors. I know that if I get sick again Sammy won't be able to visit me and no one else would want to. I'm just not going to put myself in that kind of position again. I decide to check and see if Sammy's in there all alone. I mean, what if there's a fire? I gave Pete my phone number so he could call me to sit with Sammy while he's out, but he never does.

I walk around the back of the apartment to look in the bedroom window, but the curtains are closed. "Sammy," I whisper, "are you in there?" There's no reply, so I reach up and knock on the glass. "Sammy," I say louder, pounding. "Are you in there?"

"Yeah," Sammy says from his bed, his voice muffled from the glass between us. "Is that you, Roxy?"

"No, it's the tooth fairy," I say. "What are you doing?"

"I'm doing nothing," he says. "What the hell do you think I'm doing? Come in the house."

"I can't," I say. "The door's locked. Where's Pete?"

"Try opening the window," he says.

I push up on the bottom of the window frame, but it doesn't budge. "I'm too low to get any leverage," I tell him.

"Get something to stand on and try again," he says.

I look around the tiny back yard, but I don't see anything. "I'll just wait until Pete gets back, and he can let me in the door like a normal person."

"Pete left this morning," he says, "and he hasn't been back since."

"Where did he go?"

"Just try to open the goddamned window already, Rox," Sammy says. "I'm not going to talk to you like this."

"Touchy, touchy," I say. "Hang on, and I'll see what I can do."

"I'm not going anywhere," Sammy says, the smart ass.

I walk around his small back yard looking, but there's nothing there at all. In the yard to the right there's a yellow slide, a green sand turtle, and a red tricycle, but I can't just go over there and take the kid's toys. In the yard on the left, there's a picnic table, but there's no way I'll be able to move it all the way over to Sammy's yard by myself. I guess I have no choice but to go for the tricycle. I'm only borrowing it.

The windows are open in the house next door, and I can hear the family going about their day. The television blares Disney mice singing squeaky praises to Cinderella. Bradley's watched that tape over a hundred times. I always keeps him busy during the days when I'm too tired to take him anywhere. I just pop the tape in and doze on the couch, smiling when Bradley says, "Mommy, look" or "here comes my favorite part." In Sammy's neighbor's house, someone rattles dishes in the sink. I wonder if she's a single mother or maybe her husband is helping her clean them up after dinner so they can have the evenings to themselves. Married life must be great I think, grabbing the tricycle and running back to Sammy's window.

I stand on the bike and knock on the window. "I'm back," I say. "Did you miss me?"

"Oh yeah," Sammy says. "Can you get the window open?"

I push up on it as hard as I can. "The sucker's got to be locked," I say. "I can't move it at all."

"Well, break it," Sammy says.

"I can't do that," I say. "Your bed is right under the window. Besides, Pete must be on his way by now. It's got to be after six."

Sammy says, "Roxy, you gotta get in."

"Maybe I should call somebody? The cops or something."

"You aren't calling the fucking cops," Sammy says. "Jesus Christ, Roxanne, just get your ass in here."

"I'm going to go get someone to help me," I say.

"Listen," Sammy says, "I got a primo stash of rock in here, and if you get in here, I'll do the whole thing up with you. All of it. I swear."

I end up wheeling the tricycle around to all the windows, pushing the screen in the kitchen window, and hiking myself into the kitchen sink. I accidentally break the pot of basil that Pete has growing on the windowsill.

"Watch your step when you get in here," Sammy yells from the bedroom.

Small white chunks cover the bedroom floor. "Holy shit," I say as I grab the hand mirror off the dresser and fall to my knees to pick up the rocks. "What happened in here?" I finish picking up the coke and set it on the dresser. I plop my ass in the wheelchair and lick the cocaine residue off my fingers while Sammy tells me what happened.

"Pete's in some deep shit with the man," Sammy says. "The motherfucker threatened to kill him if he didn't square up with him today."

"Rob did that?" I say.

Sammy snorts a laugh. "Rob's a small time Batavia rat," he says. "The dealer man's calling in all his debts. All of them. He came to town and poured acid all over the hood of Rob's car."

"When?"

"Last night at McNichol's," Sammy said. "But the point is, Rob's man is our man, Pete fucked up, and he's next."

"Oh my god, what can we do to help him?"

Sammy laughs a nasty laugh. "There's no help for him. I fucking helped him all I'm going to when he busted in here and took my stash. All that's left is what you picked up off the floor." Sammy's eyes fill up with angry tears, and his heavy breathing makes the sheet rise and fall on his chest. "He took all the pot, and, worst of all, he took all the money I had saved for the operation."

"I thought you said--"

"I know what I said, Rox. I just thought that maybe-well, it doesn't matter because he took it all, the thieving bastard."

"I can't believe that about Pete," I say.

"You think I did this myself?" Sammy yells from the bed, his head thrashing back and forth, nodding at the pulled out dresser drawers, the open closet door, the floor where I picked up the coke.

I reach over and smooth the hair out of his eyes, telling him to calm down. His hair is matted in the back, loose from its ponytail. "Do you want me to fix your hair?" I say. "I'll brush it for you."

He doesn't answer, just searches my face with dull eyes. His lips are chapped, held open by his heavy breathing.

"Sammy," I say. "Can I get you something? A drink? Something to eat? Anything?"

"Yeah," he says, the sparkle coming back to his eyes, "There's something you can do for me." He nods to the hand mirror. "You can go over there to the dresser and fix us up a couple of big fat lines. Put mine in the plastic straw."

I look at the mirror covered with shiny white rocks of cocaine. They look like tiny glaciers reflected in an ice-cold sea.

Enjoying the Ride

In the twenty years they'd been together, the only thing Bobby and Louise argued about was the leaky roof on their house. Theirs wasn't a big house, but it did have a lot of roof activity. Gables and small porches of varying pitches created interesting valleys in what would otherwise have been your everyday five-twelve split level roof. The house was a one and a half story with no attic, so the sacrifice wasn't that great when they abandoned the always damp upstairs for the relative dryness of the lower floor. The half dozen pans placed strategically to catch the rainwater or melting snow were replaced with five-gallon drywall buckets when the drips escalated into steady drizzles. A heavy thunderstorm filled the buckets to their rims, so they dragged the old cast iron bathtub out of the junk heap, into the house, up the narrow steps, and placed it under the worst spot.

"I don't know how much longer we can wait on the roof" Louise said to Bobby one day over a dinner of stewed venison and mashed potatoes with grease gravy. "Just today I found a chunk of it floating in the bathtub upstairs. I can see daylight through it, I swear."

"It's going to have to wait until we got more materials, Lou," Bobby said, pointing at her with his fork.

Over the years Bobby had collected fifteen square of shingles and stacked them in the corner of the entryway. There were twelve square of three-in-ones: seven black, two gray, two white, and one square of wedgewood, a combination of all of the above colors with a little spackling of brown which was discontinued due to lack of interest. The other three square were t-locks, so they didn't count. It would take twenty square to cover the house, plus a good measure of spray paint if they wanted them all to match. The drip edge was stacked out back in a mountain of metal more than enough to cover the variegated roof and still bring a pretty penny at the scrap yard. Quarter rolls of felt paper, starter strip, and ninety pound doubled as legs for their plywood tabletop. The bucket of nails by the front door that Bobby emptied his nail pouches into every night when he happened to be laboring for a construction crew was almost full to the top. Every few months they'd dump the nails out onto their table and sort them according to types: framing spikes, shiny gutter spikes, roofers with big flat heads of varying lengths, drywall screws, spirals and ring shanks dull in their galvanized skins, underlayment nails, cut masonry nails and eights, tens, twelves, sixteens, and twenties--commons and sinkers.

"I done told you," Bobby said, "I ain't doing it half-ass. A shingle patch here, a tar paper patch there. I'm doing it right, all at one time."

Louise said, "I know you want to wait on the roof, but, well, with this new job at the Martins' starting up and everything, I just thought--"

"You just thought?"

"Yeah, I just thought that since, you know, since the masons hired you to labor and the framers said they'd keep you on that we'd--"

"I quit today," Bobby said. "Called me a nigger, so I quit."

"To your face?" Louise asked. "Are you sure they weren't just kidding you?"

"Kidding? They ain't kidding when I'm down in the basement pounding in joist hangers and the general he come on the job and say, 'You boys is too slow. You better hire you a couple of laborers to move things along,' and the framers say, 'We hear you; we got our nigger downstairs.' Then, when come up, the general just about choked on his coffee, laughing his ass off. No, they ain't kidding, and I ain't working for them no more."

"What are we going to do now?" Louise asked. "I don't think the roof will last another winter."

"Let me do the thinking," Bobby said. "We'll just have to raise the rest of the money. We got a hundred stashed in the kitty. I got that gig with the highway department, and I been talking to that taxidermy man about buying some of the animals they pay me to pick up. Besides, we probably got about a hundred in scrap metal out back. And when the weather breaks, the onions will be ready to plant on the muck, too. We be all right like always."

Bobby couldn't read or write, but he could count and do math and provide for himself and Louise. His parents had been indigent farmers, traveling from muck to muck as the seasons changed. They worked and they drank and they scrounged food for their ever-increasing family, even if it was only carp caught from one of the drainage ditches running between the coal black fields and then fried in bacon grease and smothered in all

the onions they could eat. The family moved on and Bobby stayed behind, not sure if they knew or cared that he wasn't with them. At first, he'd tried to register himself in the Delta high school, but he wasn't able to fill out the forms and had no parents to sign them and the principal didn't know what to do for him except hire him to come over- and do yard work. Under the table, of course.

Bobby always said he had two goals in his life: to buy a truck and to buy a house. The truck came first and fulfilled both goals for quite a few years until he got his hands on the old Avery place. He'd watched the lawyers' and the Averies watch him when he counted out ten thousand dollars in cash and coins, and he'd watched them not watch him at all when he signed the papers with a scribble that passed for his signature.

Louise was fourteen years old the first time she laid eyes on Bobby, traveling around the county looking for work, and she watched him for three years, plotting and working up her courage. He mowed the lawns on both sides of them without a shirt, his smooth, hairless chest shining like an oil slick. She'd watch him from her bedroom window, where she stayed most of the time to avoid the man who drank too 'much and hollered too loud and smacked Louise and her mother around just to keep them in line. Bobby would drive by the house on the way to the junkyard with his blue Ford pick-up swaying from a heavy load of used-up lawn mowers and rusted-out swing sets. Louise always tried to be outside, tossing her orange curls, smiling through her freckles, and waving to him on his trip back in the never-empty truck. Bobby always smiled and waved back. Once, he beeped his horn and winked at her.

When her mother's husband heard there was a black man doing odd jobs around town, he sat there in the chair that used to be her father's and said, "I got nothing against

niggers. I think everyone should own one." He'd ordered her mother to hire "the little monkey" to do the yard work, and told her to make sure she "jewed him down on the price," too, because "it's amazing what them people will do for nothing just to keep from starving." Louise thought, what better way to get even than to go out with a black man, to let him take the virginity her mother and stepfather guarded like it was a national treasure?

Lying about doing it with Bobby turned out to be less scary and just as effective as figuring out the logistics and carrying through with the act itself. Louise's stepfather pushed her bruised body out of the car at the end of Bobby's driveway and threw the garbage bag full of her clothes out after her. He never wanted to see the little whore again.

"So what did you say to them when you quit?" Louise asked Bobby.

"I didn't say nothing," he said. "I just ain't going back tomorrow." Bobby never liked conflict, and he allowed nothing to upset him, said it was pointless. Whenever Louise got upset-over her mother or her former friends pretending not to see her when she shopped at the Picadilly or Bobby refusing to teach her how to drive or the crank on the wringer washer breaking down again or the fact that they never made any babies-- Bobby would tell her, "Just lean back and enjoy the ride." Bobby gave new meaning to the term lean back; when he stood or when he walked, his upper body angled away from his lower body so that it looked as if he had just avoided a punch to the face. His hips and groin were aligned with his knees, and his shoulders were so far back behind his feet that he looked like he was walking downhill. Trouble rolled off him like rain, Bobby leaning back and enjoying the ride.

That's what he'd said the first time they'd made love, six months after her arrival on his doorstep. "If you're sure?" he'd asked her, and she nodded, knowing no other way to repay him for taking her in and being kind to her, and, God help her, she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted anything in her whole life. "Then just lean back, Lou." He'd been gentle, and Louise wanted to marry him.

Louise watched Bobby leave the next morning from the upstairs where she was bailing out the bathtub and dumping the rainwater out the dormer window. She waved, and he beeped the horn and winked at her. "Might better save that water for the garden," he yelled up to her. "We be putting it in any day now." Why didn't I think of that? Louise wondered. It was much closer to haul the rainwater down from upstairs than it was to haul creek water up from down back. That's why she let Bobby do the thinking.

Louise kept herself too busy to think much. Besides, she thought, what would she do with her spare time if she had any? There was never anything to read in the house. One time when they were at the junkyard looking for parts for the second Ford, an orange flat bed with a steel I beam for a back bumper, Louise found an entire box full of magazines--*Ladies' Home Journal*, *Woman's World*, *Woman's Day*, *Better Homes and Gardens*--and threw it in the back of the truck to take home. Bobby quickly grew tired of answering all those foolish questions. "No, I don't care that you fat; more Lou to love; No, I ain't buying you no make-up to cover up that polka dotted face of yours; No, it don't matter to me that you ain't got no job because you got plenty to do around here; I ain't got no sex needs to tell you about; who in the hell is Ethan Allen?" He made her bum the magazines because they turned her into somebody else.

It was because of the magazines that she found out he couldn't read, and, wanting to give something back to him, she offered to teach him. "Lou," he said, "It might be a fact that I only got ten years of living over you, but I got a hundred years of experience on you. Now, there ain't nothing you can teach me that I need to know. You just lean back and let me' show you what you need to get along."

Bobby told her too many people confused what they needed with what they wanted. People wanted fancy furniture when all they needed was somewhere to set their asses. They wanted fancy clothes when all they needed was something to cover their nakedness. People needed a little money for gas and other necessities, but they wanted more than they had and spent more than they had so that they really had nothing at all.

People needed food, but they wanted convenience, and Bobby showed her how to survive with what they had or could find. Bobby and Louise gardened and canned, raised, trapped, and hunted their food. They had a chest freezer full on one side with turkey, fish, rabbit, and venison meat to eat. They stored fox, coon, and deerskins on the other side to sell once the prices went back up. They had a chicken coop for eggs and a goat for milk that doubled as a lawn mower. Every few years, they'd raise a pig and butcher it themselves. They made their own soap, and they cut their own firewood. They pumped water from the rusty red-handled pump over the cement-covered well in the front yard and heated it on the wood stove in the house or outside over the fire pit in hot weather. The well couldn't handle too much use, so they used it only for washing clothes, dishes, and bodies. Louise cleaned the wooden floors with sand and salt, scrubbing the granules into the floor with a scrub brush until they turned black with the dirt they'd picked up and then sweeping them out the door and down the rickety steps.

About every other month they'd drive the five miles into Warren and go to the Picadilly on the corner of Main and Maple to buy some sugar, salt, flour, and coffee.

Bobby was late coming home that night, which wasn't unusual for late spring because of all the baby animals that managed to find their way under the wheels of speeding cars. The Delta County highway department paid him \$300 a year to scoop them up off the County roads. Under the table, of course.

Louise kept dinner warm for him until eleven and then went upstairs to sit on the edge of the bathtub and watch out the dormer window for his red Ford pick-up to pull in the driveway. It was after one o'clock when Bobby finally showed up, driving the truck backward, about three miles an hour, up their long, twisting driveway. Louise ran outside as soon as she saw him coming.

"Tranny shit the bed at the far end of twenty, almost to the county line," Bobby said, slamming the truck door and holding his arms out for a hug. "Drove in reverse--" Louie dove into his arms, nearly knocking him off balance. "Lou, have you been crying?"

"A little," she said. "I was worried about you. I thought you were dead."

"Oh, baby," he said, his teeth smiling in the dark, "the only dead things around here is the damn truck and the critters in the back of it."

"Can you fix it?" she asked, her breathing shaky like she'd been crying for a long time and now she couldn't stop.

"I don't know," he said. "I can try."

"I thought you left me, Bobby," Lou said, hugging her chubby arms around his waist as they walked up the porch and into the house. "I really did."

"All these years and you still worrying about that?" Bobby laughed at her. "Shit, Lou, you outlasted three trucks and a roof. You all I got."

"Then why haven't you married me?" Louise asked, surprising even herself. In all their twenty years together, Louise had only brought up the subject of marriage one time before. It was during the magazine incident, during the time when she still half-hoped to have a baby, before she'd entirely given up on seeing a real table and starched yellow curtains in the kitchen, and knowing the love of a family. Bobby laughed and said the same thing both times:

"Because I always say if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The truck was definitely broken, and Bobby tried to fix it. He started by fixing up an old Schwinn bicycle from the junk heap to get him back and forth on his parts buying expeditions. "Sure is a lot of work for my legs just to give my ass a ride," Bobby said. He spent all the money in his pockets and lost twenty pounds before he finally shook his head and pronounced the truck dead beyond repair. "We can probably buy one cheap off of the muck," he said, "but not till fall."

"But what about the roof?" Louise asked. "It's really taking a beating with these cold May rains."

"Good thing June's coming," Bobby said, smiling and leaning back in one of the rickety kitchen chairs that they'd picked up off the side of Route Twenty a few years back.

They planted their garden a week before Memorial Day, and a late frost killed everything two weeks later.

The muck wasn't hiring because they'd bussed in Mexicans in a federal work exchange program. "Freaking Spies," Louise said when Bobby pedaled up the driveway with the bad news. "I always heard they were thieves, and now they're stealing your job."

"Ain't no need to be like that, Lou," Bobby said and went to bed without any dinner.

They didn't have to worry about the roof because it didn't rain for six straight weeks. "Ain't nothing but a thing," Bobby said, even when the creek dried up to a drizzle, its banks cracked and broken like a twisted smile from giant chapped lips. Half of the new garden shriveled up and died, and the other half grew into a miniature garden with miniature plants. The well only gave a couple of gallons of water before it started spewing out brown silt sucked off the shallow bottom and they had to give it a chance to refill for the next day.

"I seen John down at the highway department," Bobby said, breathing heavy from the hard pedaling required to get up their driveway. "He said they been getting all kinds of complaints about the critters, people calling and saying how cars is thumping on them all night long, how a deer got spread out for a quarter mile on Bishop's hill. Said they're going to let me go if I don't get the truck on the road soon."

"The sons-of-bitches!" Louise said. "Kicking a man when he's down." Her shoulders shook and worry lines creased her face as she started crying.

"You the one bringing me down, Lou," Bobby said. "I ain't never seen you falling apart like this. Except maybe the day you showed up here. Remember? Remember how you was crying and telling me your name? Remember?"

Louise nodded, semi-smiling at the memory of her young, frightened self, blushing and crying, trying to explain to Bobby how he'd become so intimately involved in her life when they'd never actually spoken before.

"I see you do," Bobby said, smiling. "And what did I say to you then?"

"You -said if I quit my crying and kept smiling at you every day just like I'd been doing, then you'd keep a roof over my head."

"Same thing goes now, Lou," Bobby said, ruffling her graying curls. "Nothing's changed, baby. Nothing's changed."

They sorted the mountain of metal into smaller hills of brass, copper, aluminum, cast iron, and steel. Bobby arranged for the guys at the junkyard to pick them up, along with the stripped down truck carcass, and cash them in for him. For a percentage, of course.

Bobby sold the furs from the freezer, and then he sold the freezer to a Mexican family from the muck that came and picked it up in a rusty station wagon while Louise hid upstairs with the kitty. She didn't trust those people as far as she could throw them, and it upset her that Bobby allowed them on their property. First his job and now their freezer? So what if they could buy it back at the end of the season?

Bobby worked for Tri-County Roofing for two weeks and brought home a few pounds of roofing nails and two and a half bundles of brown shingles, half a bundle short of a square.

Louise took all the jelly out of the pantry and put the jars down by the road with a sign and an empty coffee can. Nobody bought any.

"Another business down the tubes," Bobby said when she brought all the jars back up the driveway. "What'd you expect for a dead end road? These is hard times, Lou; even the Picadilly went under since they put up that new Tops over in Delta." He looked at her sad face and told her not to worry. "I think we got enough to buy something," Bobby said. "It might not be pretty, but as long it hauls my ass around, I don't care if it's a car."

"I don't believe it," Louise snorted, stacking all the jars back in the pantry. "You? In a car? That'll be the day."

"I ain't shitting you, Lou," Bobby said, sighing. "I must be getting old, settling. I'm even going to settle for patching the roof, too." He winked at her. "Just so I can say I always kept a roof over your head."

"You old sweet talker," Louise said, hugging him. "I'll help you, too, just like I did with the metal pile."

"Um, honey," Bobby said, "the roof ain't me; it can't handle as much woman as I'm used to handling."

Bobby set out early for his vehicle-buying trips. "I ain't coming back until I find something," he'd say every morning, and every night he'd tell her about the odd jobs he'd done that day while out looking for their new ride. He hooked a Radio Flyer wagon to the back of the bike, and they started to rebuild the metal mountain.

One day in early fall Bobby was late coming home, so Louise assumed her old perch on the bathtub upstairs. She stayed awake most of the night watching out the window, and fell asleep right before dawn with her head resting on her arms on the edge

of the tub. In the morning she woke up with rain drizzling on the cold porcelain next to her head. She searched the house and the yard for Bobby, but there was no sign of him or his Schwinn. She ran all the way down the driveway in the cold rain calling his name. Louise lost her footing on the wet leaves and twisted her left ankle. She sat in the middle of the driveway on a colorful bed of fall leaves over stone, crying a little over her hurt leg and crying a lot over what could have happened to Bobby. Maybe he got hit by a car and was lying in a ditch bleeding. His bike didn't have any reflectors. Maybe the Spies out on the muck robbed him. The guy who was at the house had looked like a thief, and his wife and kids had stayed in the car like they were afraid of him, and Bobby was carrying all that money.. Maybe he was sick; he had been losing a lot of weight, and he wasn't a young man anymore to be traipsing around the county on a bike after pushing a lawn mower or shoveling shit all day. She had to find him, and she wasn't going to do it sitting there on her fat ass crying like a little girl.

Louise limped up to the house and dropped her soaking wet clothes on the shingles in the entryway. She limped naked over to the laundry pile and pulled out a pair of Bobby's long johns and wrapped them around her ankle. She secured the makeshift Ace bandage with a giant safety pin and some duct tape. She dressed herself in the striped tent dress she'd worn most of the summer to stay cool, and she covered it with a plaid flannel shirt that was too big for Bobby to wear. She couldn't find a pair of socks that matched, so she grabbed the first two that had the fewest holes in them and put them on, stretching out the elastic over her swollen left ankle. It was a tight fit with her boots, but she took the laces out of the left one and squeezed her foot into it the best she could.

The rain stopped by the time she set out to look for Bobby, and the humidity rose as the sun dried the wet earth. Louise checked the ditches on both sides of the road, and she called his name every ten yards or so the entire two miles to the intersection of their road and Route 20. Proceeding straight ahead for seven miles would take her over Route 5 to the city of Delta, the county seat, the highway department, and the sheriff's department: Three miles to the left was the town of Warren, and three miles to the right were the muck lands. Louise didn't know which way to go, and she doubted whether or not her body could carry her anymore in either direction. Her twisted ankle throbbed, and her other ankle hurt from the strain of carrying more than its fair share of her large body. Her breath gasped out of her heavy chest, and she regretted not bringing along any water.

She sat on the corner to rest and to figure out what to do. She hadn't been anywhere without Bobby in years. She never spoke to anybody but him and the clerks at the Picadilly. What would she say? Excuse me, have you seen my boyfriend? You know, Bobby? About my height, black, with a halo of graying hair sticking out a few inches from his head? You remember Bobby? You knew who he was when your garage needed to be cleaned out or your lawn needed to be mowed, but you forgot him soon enough when you drove by him on his bike. Don't you think you at least owed him a ride, even though Bobby said nobody owed him anything? Maybe you sons of bitches ran him over.

That's why Bobby always did all the talking. She couldn't control her anger, and Bobby didn't seem to have any. Trouble rolled off him like rain. He was probably home right now, mixing up a critter stew or frying up a fresh fish for supper. Then, he'd wink

at her and laugh when he heard how she'd spent her day. And maybe then he'd help her wash her sweaty hair over the washtub on the back porch. He would make a poultice for her hurt leg and elevate it and call himself the doctor like he always did when she was sick or hurt, putting cool cloths on her head and making her feel better by making her laugh.

Louise limped home.

But there was no Bobby, no dinner, no sleep, no rest from the thoughts of what could've happened to him.

Morning came and Louise decided to walk to Warren to find him. Her ankles were still swollen, and the boots would not go on her feet, even when she unwrapped the left one from the dirty long johns. By the time she'd walked barefoot to the end of the driveway, she remembered that the Picadilly was closed down so she wouldn't know a soul to ask about Bobby, except maybe the guys from the junkyard on the other end of town. She stubbed her toe on a rock, saw the blood but didn't feel any pain because her feet were numb, prickling with pins and needles. Louise hobbled back up to the house. She crawled up the stairs and soaked her feet in the cold water in the tub while watching for Bobby out the dormer window.

Over the next week, Louise's left leg turned a nasty shade of black, then purple, yellow, and green, a rainbow against the dingy white of the bathtub. She slipped into the water once when she accidentally fell asleep and dreamed of Bobby in a deep ditch on the muck being eaten by giant carp. She ate jelly straight from the jar, licking shaking blobs of it off her fingers and dropping some onto her dress and flannel shirt.

She set out for the muck as soon as she could squeeze her feet into the boots. Louise rechecked the ditches on both sides of their road but decided to do one side of Twenty at a time. She walked against traffic, sometimes on the side of the road and sometimes in the ditches if the brush was too thick to get a good view. Cars gave her a wide berth, as if she were some dead critter they didn't want smeared on the underbellies of their shiny new rides.

The closer she got to the muck, the stronger the air smelled of onions. She passed signs stapled to telephone poles that read, "Come to the Warren Onion Festival! Win a new Ford F-150 Pick-Up Truck at Warren's Onion Festival!" She passed stacked crates full of onions as big as her back porch. Tall green hedges and deep drainage ditches separated the black fields, some still with onion tassels in orderly rows, others with rotting leaves plastered to the wet soil and golden onion skins skittering across their bumpy tops. In the distance across the fields Louise saw little red sheds, a huge red barn, and black farmland stretching for miles. Stooped over field workers were tiny dots in the distance. She turned off on a dirt road.

Louise came to a cluster of shacks and trailers that housed the migrant workers. Children playing barefoot in the mud puddles stopped when they saw Louise limping into camp; they watched her with wide eyes. Louise ignored them and knocked on the door of the first cabin. No one answered, so she started pounding on the door with both hands. A dark-haired woman with a baby on her hip opened the door and Louise blurted out, "Have you seen Bobby? Do you know where Bobby is?"

"No English," the woman said.

"Please," Louise said. "Bobby must be here. He would have come on his bike. You know, bicycle?"

The woman shook her head in confusion.

Louise raised her voice and tried to look in the little house. 'Doesn't anyone around here speak English. Can't anybody speak English?"

"No English!" the woman repeated-and slammed the door in her face.

Louise started crying, going from door to door, pounding on them, and calling for Bobby. She tripped on her sore ankle and fell into one of the dark puddles. The children ran away and hid or were scooped up by their mothers and taken away before the crazy lady did them any harm. She lay there on her stomach, her head on her muddy arms, crying.

Louise felt strong arms carrying her. Bobby always took such good care of me, doctoring me when I was sick. I'm sick, Bobby. Make me feel better. There were too many arms for it to be just Bobby. Where were they taking her? She struggled and someone held her down and shushed her and wiped her face and lips with a cool cloth. You always take such good care of me, Bobby. Bobby. Bobby.

She awoke to the steady drizzle of rain on a tin roof, to the smell of spicy chili, to the face of a woman sitting in a chair next to the bed staring at Louise with concern and maybe a little bit of fear. Louise recognized her as the woman who'd sat in the station wagon in their driveway while her husband and Bobby had loaded the freezer onto it. "Where's Bobby?" Louise asked her. "Have you seen Bobby?"

The woman answered her in Spanish.

"The freezer," Louise said. "The man with the freezer? Remember?"

"Si," the woman said and pointed to the freezer five feet away in the middle of the kitchen, covered with a checked tablecloth and surrounded by chairs. She rattled off more words in her native tongue, and Louise started crying.

"Eat?" the woman asked, alternating between making eating motions with her arms and mouth and pointing to Louise. "Senora eat?"

Louise shook her head and let the tears flow unchecked.

The door opened and three men walked through it. They were wet from the rain, but Louise still recognized one of the men as the woman's husband. "What did you do to Bobby?" she screamed at him as soon as she saw him. "Where's Bobby?" she asked and then made herself as small as possible in the corner of the bed.

A rapid exchange of Spanish exploded between the woman and the husband. Their words slowed down until it was the woman speaking while the men nodded their heads, stroked their chins, and looked at Louise. The husband approached the bed where Louise sat, and she asked him where Bobby was.

"Freezer man?" he asked Louise. "Go?" He motioned down the road towards their house.

"I don't know. Have you seen him?"

"Buy car," the man said, nodding and steering an imaginary car.

"When? Where? Which car?" Louise didn't understand him.

The three men tried to talk at once, all three with a little English, a little Spanish, and some improvised sign language. They pointed to the station wagon in front of the cabin and ticked days off backwards on their fingers. From what Louise understood, Bobby had agreed to buy their car but had never come back to get it. He'd left in a truck

with two American men for the Onion Festival and no one had seen him since. She nodded, unable to speak, unable to cry.

The woman tried again to get Louise to eat, but she pushed the food away after taking one bite. The husband and wife each took a side, and led Louise out through the rain to the car and helped her in. The wife set a cottage cheese container full of steaming chili on Louise's lap, said something in Spanish, and gave her a hug. Louise briefly rested her head against the woman's shoulder, but she didn't hug her back. The man took her home and helped her up the porch steps, one arm under her elbow, the other around her back. Louise thanked him and went into the house and closed the door behind her. She dropped the chili on the shingles and went upstairs by the window. She watched the taillights of the station wagon leaving the driveway.

The rain kept coming for days. The tub filled up and overflowed. The water ran across the floor and seeped into the downstairs ceiling. Chunks of plaster worked their way loose and bounced onto the floors. Louise picked up the chunks and threw them out the door until the porch looked like it was covered in snow. The wind picked up and blew another patch of the curled shingles off the back of the roof, and then it took the old wooden shingles off, too. The hole was as big as a bucket, so putting a bucket under it was out of the question. Louise couldn't move the big bathtub by herself, even if it were empty.

She went downstairs and picked out three bundles of black shingles. Even when she split the bundles in half, they were too heavy for Louise to carry. She split them in half again and thought she could carry that much up the ladder. She went in the backyard to get the ladder. Its wooden rungs were swollen from the damp to twice their normal

circumference. Louise dragged it on its side across the yard, but she couldn't stand it up against the side of the house no matter how she tried.

She trudged back in the house, carried the shingles up the stairs, and stacked them by the dormer window. She filled the wet pockets of her flannel shirt with assorted roofing nails and looked for a hammer. She couldn't find one, so she grabbed a big rock from the driveway.

The bottom of the dormer window rested right on the roof, and a foot wide strip of shingles separated the window from the front edge of the roof. She leaned her upper body out, and although it was a tight squeeze, she thought she could fit through the window. She threw the shingles out a few at a time, reaching as far to the edge of the window as she possibly could and whipping them backwards towards the ridge. A lot of them slid back down the roof and disappeared over the edge and into the front yard.

When the pile of shingles was gone, it was time for Louise to go. She held the rock firmly in her right hand and held tight to the window frame with her left as she backed out the window. She couldn't get her legs out first, so she went out butt first, leaning way back to ease out first one leg and then the other. The roof creaked under her weight. She slid along to the edge of the dormer and clung there for several minutes.

The wind had died down, but the sky still drizzled some, as if it were spitting on her. The old shingles were covered in moss, and they were spongy under her feet. She fell to her belly and gathered up all the shingles she could reach. More must have fallen off than she realized because she only grabbed about a dozen off the roof. She could see a whole pile of them in the side yard where she'd overthrown. Louise slithered up to the

ridge on her stomach and looked over the other side where the hole gaped open. Nothing looked too sturdy on that side. Louise could see inside in more than a few spots.

She worked her way over to the hole and straddled the ridge with her legs while holding on to the chimney for support until she sat upright. She leaned over and set a shingle over the top of the hole. She reached for a nail in her pocket, and the shingle fell off the hole and almost slid off the roof. She placed another one, bent over with a nail and the rock to tack it in place, and the rock slipped out of her hand and bounced down through the hole in the roof. She started crying, wrapping her arms around the chimney, hugging it. The bricks gave a little beneath her squeeze. Maybe she could work a brick loose and use that for a hammer. She felt the bottom of the chimney, the middle, and stood up to feel the top. She checked all the bricks, and the mortar cracked. None of the bricks gave readily except one on the other side where Louise could barely reach unless she went around the chimney and stood on the overhang. She cried with fright, with frustration and with grief. She screamed for Bobby to help her, to come back. She sobbed and hugged the chimney.

As if from afar, Louise watched herself on the roof. She wondered about bargains and broken things, and resting her face on the cold bricks, she knew that this was more than just a thing. Louise sat still, and the wet chill barely intruded, eclipsed by the image she had frozen in her mind. She saw herself stepping away from the chimney, leaning back over the eaves, and enjoying the ride.

Perfect Posture

Stack the books. Penmanship. Recipes. Atlases. Etiquette. Square your shoulders. Pull them back. Put your chin up. Straighten the spine. That stomach: suck it in. That chest: push it out. Smile. Hold still. Let me put the books on your head. Walk. Turn around. Face me. Smile. Walk. Sit in the chair. Cross your legs at the ankle. Whores cross them at the knees. Get up. You dropped the books. Start over. Walk. Twirl. Come back. Sit. Rise. Walk. Turn. Perfection. Climb the stairs. Turn your knees to the side. You want me looking up your skirt? You dropped them. Pick them up. Start again. Stack. Walk. Climb. Turn. Straighten. Smile. Never drop the smile. The books. The shoulders. The breasts.

Wrap hair around curlers. Moisturize. Wash. Brush. Blush. Hide the circles. Hide the makeup. Smile. Exercise. Eliminate fat. Stretch away love handles. Say vowels: a-e-i-o-u-lose the double chin. Wear perfume. Avoid vanity. Rub lotion. Wanting your hands to look like mine? File your nails. Repair cuticles. Iron your clothes. Scrub out spots. Make do. Sew buttons. Search the box. Restitch elastic. Darn holes. Alter. Hang to dry. Iron. Choose dresses and skirts. Match shoes and purse.

Store white after Labor Day. Black after Memorial Day. Close the shower curtain; hide the stockings. Fold. Crease. Use fabric softener. Bleach whites. Bird shit stains sheets. Semen washes out. Scrub your blood. Take pride.

Sweep. Dust. Vacuum. Remember spring-cleaning. Scrub the floors. Polish the woodwork. Remove curtains. Crumple newspapers. Mix vinegar and water. Avoid streaks. Wash walls from the bottom up. Catch the streams. Wipe the soot. Stack the wood. Make your bed. Keep his castle. His trailer. His shack. Smell Pinesol. Disinfect. Deodorize. Decorate for holidays. Organize drawers. Label boxes. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Filth reflects on you. And me.

Mark the calendar. Keep track of birthdays. Anniversaries. Buy a box of cards from the VFW. Practice penmanship. Send condolences. Acknowledge marriages. Illnesses. Births. Deaths. Send thank yous. Make casseroles. Babysit. Turn away tears. Ignore divorce. Arrest. Depression. Remember the shoulders? The chin? Make a schedule. Remain flexible. Volunteer. Remain silent. Accept no help. Offer help. Listen to gossip. Keep it to yourself. Avoid their mistakes.

Cook meals. Preheat ovens. Plant. Weed. Harvest. Shuck. Cut. Slice. Season. Mix. Stir. Preserve. Marinate. Bake bread. Cakes. Cookies. Pies. Boil. Broil. Fry. Baste. Roast. Read recipes. Hide recipes. Hide sweat. Hide tears. Smile. Set the table. Silver. China. Napkins. Consult your book. Trivets. Protect the polish. Centerpieces. Condiments. Serving dishes. Niggers set pans on the table. Heat. Aromas. Sparkles. Compliments? Swallow pride. Or choke on it. You choose. Pick at your food. Serve yourself last. Nibble. Jump up. Serve seconds. Reheat. Clear. Wash. Presoak. Make coffee. Serve dessert. Store leftovers. Tupperware. Saran Wrap. Reynolds Wrap.

Butter tubs. Stretch the budget. No meat in the compost. No cans in the fire. No men in the kitchen. Wash dishes. Wipe counters. Scrub pans. Plan for tomorrow. Rinse. Dry. Put away. Eliminate water spots. Sweep. Turn off the light. Conserve energy.

Wipe tears. Wipe noses. Wipe bottoms. Breastfeed. Ignore fatigue. Sacrifice sleep. Spread your arms. Spread your legs. Say yes. Oh, yes. Close your mind. Open your heart. Numb yourself to the pain. You'll forget, but you'll remember. Pain. Smile at miracles. Coo to them. Sing lullabies. Scream inside. The Indians squatted under a tree in the morning. Bit on a strap. Worked in the afternoon. Carried babies on their backs. Let them bite their breasts. Suck out their life. Uttered nothing. Strive for their strength. Raise children. Discipline them. Yourself. Teach your daughters. Protect your sons. Keep love. Give love. Dole it out in scoops for the boys. Surround them. Shower them. Show them. Feed teaspoonfuls of love to your daughters. Thank your mother. Live her love. Love her truth and her lies.

Rainbow Wings

My husband didn't deserve a son, and it was as simple as that; he didn't deserve to have his name carried on. Mama said it happened because I didn't listen to her and crawl around on my hands and knees to turn the baby around inside of me. I know better than that because she didn't see me crawling around on the cold kitchen floor six times a day cleaning up my own vomit, scraping it out of the cracks between the black and white linoleum tiles. She didn't see me down on all fours wiping up the throat-burning spit that came shooting out when there was nothing left to throw up but parts of my insides. I was down there, all right, down there cleaning up my own piss after it gushed out of me without warning. Everything from a simple little sneeze to picking up one of the girls set me to leaking. Twenty-five years old and I damn near needed a diaper:

Ben said it happened because my mama cursed us that day in May when the hummingbird flew in the house. She was always telling us these superstitious little sayings, but he never took her seriously and laughed at me when I did because they seemed so ridiculous.

If you sing at the table, you'll get a bellyache. If you sweep down cobwebs, company will drop in. If you dream something three times, it will come true. If your shoe is untied, someone is thinking of you. If a bird flies in your house, someone is going to die.

That hummingbird was the most beautiful bird I'd ever seen in my whole life.

"Why are you letting that child answer the phone?" Mama started right in on me as soon as I took the receiver from my six-year-old, Alice. "I could barely understand her. And why isn't she in school?"

"I'm sick, Mama," I told her. "I couldn't get her off to school on time, so she's been helping me with the little ones, getting diapers and bottles and--"

"You let her miss the bus for that? I taught you better than that," Mama said to me. "What's wrong with you? Women have been having babies for thousands of years, and they still manage to see to their other responsibilities. It's not like you have to go to work every day."

"Mama, I'm really sick with this one. None of the girls were like this."

"That's cause this one's a boy. I can tell by the way you're carrying so low," Mama said. "They're tougher on you because the world is tougher on them."

"It better be a boy," I said and started to cry. "Ben said after all this trouble if it's not a boy, he's going to stuff it back in there." I was crying and hated myself for my own weakness because it scares a two-year-old to see her mama crying, so she started crying and woke up the baby, Emmy, from her nap. My four-year-old, Hannah, always the little mother hen, tried to comfort Shoebootie, who was in a full-blown temper tantrum any

two-year-old would be proud of, and got her hair pulled for the effort. Alice got Emmy up out of her crib and was stumbling under the baby's massive weight. She was big for nine months, with pimpled hands, chubby legs, and multiple chins. I always had to fill her creases with Johnson's baby powder so she didn't get heat rash. Alice made it as far as- the couch and dropped her on it, starting a fresh batch of crying. Damn kids. Ben always said he had a house full of sniveling women on his hands, and there it was in living color.

"What in the world is going on over there?" Mama asked. "You better get some control over those kids before it's too late. I never let my children carry on ..."

"Mama," I said, "please come help me. I'm sick. The kids are driving me crazy." I hadn't cleaned up after breakfast or lunch, so the house was a mess. I hadn't taken anything out for dinner and I didn't have anything clean to serve it on anyway. "I need help. I'm sick and ..."

"You better pull yourself together before your husband comes home," Mama said, "working all day and having to come home to that. I'll come help you this one time, but you're going to have to learn to do it on your own like I did. My job is done, and I never had a mother to help me."

"I know you didn't, Mama." I'd heard it all before. "Hannah! Just leave her be, and I'll . . . Mama, I've got to go get the baby."

I was halfway through changing Shoebootie's diaper, holding her crossed ankles in one hand and the puke bucket in the other, when Mama got there. Shoebootie kicked and squealed when she saw her grandma and smeared shit all over her heels and onto my

last clean pair of maternity pants. I only had three decent pair left that still fit me and had enough elastic to hold them up, but I'd be damned if I would buy myself another pair. Mama took over just in time for me to make it to the bathroom.

Mama burst in while I was showering and set Shoebootie on the toilet. “You tell your mama you're too big for diapers.”

"Big," Shoebootie echoed.

"Tell her Shoebootie's a big girl who uses the potty."

"Potty."

"Tell her . . ."

"You just told her, Mama," I said through the shower curtain.

It seemed like everyone talked to me through my children. Just the week before in the grocery store some skinny girl behind me in the check out line struck up a conversation with me through the girls.

"Your mommy sure buys a lot of milk," she'd said to Hannah. Translation: "Hey you pregnant cow, why don't you let me go ahead of you because you obviously have way more stuff than r do."

Hannah nodded her head while pulling Shoebootie away from the candy. Then, she picked up Emmy's pacifier off the floor and popped it back in her mouth.

"What a good little helper you are," the skinny girl said, smiling with all fifty of her teeth. Translation: "Hey, lady! Can't you see your kids are out of control here?" She took the M & M's away from Shoebootie and said, "No-no, you silly girl. Are you a silly girl? I think you are. Just look at your feet. Now that's silly." Translation: “How in the

hell can you take this kid out of the house with one shoe and one slipper on her feet?

When I have kids, I'm never going ...”

"Hey, listen," I said. "Why don't you go in front of me?"

"Well, if you're sure."

Oh, I'm sure.

I tried to delay getting out of the shower, but I ran out of hot water. "Would you two mind?" I said and shut off the shower and stood there shivering. "Hurry up, already."

Mama whipped back the shower curtain and handed me a towel. "You've got nothing to be ashamed of in front of your old mama. I used to change your diapers, you know." I grabbed the towel from her and covered what I could.

"And I'm just telling you that you don't want three kids in diapers."

No shit.

"Mama fat," Shoebootie giggled from the toilet. She really was a beautiful child, with straight dark hair and big brown eyes. And what a clown! Her sense of humor delighted her father, so the little ham played it to the hilt. One day she'd dressed herself in the height of toddler fashion, an inside out green dress over a pair of pink pajama bottoms with one black Mary Jane and one snow boot on her feet, and her daddy started calling her Shoebootie. The nickname, or the attention, made her laugh those musical baby belly laughs that make a mother want to laugh and cry at the same time. Whenever we went anywhere after that, she always wore two unmatched shoes on her feet.

"Mama's a house," I said back to her, trying to wiggle my wet body into my purple nylon bathrobe. Mama helped me work it down over my mammoth stomach, telling me if I counted the new stretch marks, I'd be able to guess the weight of the baby.

As if I could. As if I would.

"You're lucky your belly button isn't inside out," Mama said. "It's a sure sign of twins."

God. forbid.

I wondered what having no belly button at all meant. I'm sure it means something when it's not an innie or an outie but just a smooth dark tender area where a belly button is supposed to be.

By the time Ben came home, swooping into the house like long-lost lover, Mama had a steaming hot dinner on the table. She had the house, the girls, and me spit-shined and polished. I had opened the windows for some fresh air because the house smelled like a pork chop-Pine-sol-Pledge cocktail with some perfume thrown in for good measure. Mama had made me wear some perfume and make-up because pregnant women can be beautiful with a little help. She'd brought me over a new striped maternity dress, an early birthday present, and made me put it on. I looked like a circus tent.

Ben set his thermos and lunch box in the sink and kissed all of us, bear hugs and Eskimo-nose rubs for Alice, a peck on each cheek for Hannah, and sloppy spit smooches from Shoebootie. He kissed Mama on her left cheek and me on my right. He didn't bother with Emmy because her chubby cheeks and bald head were covered in crushed bananas and Cheerios. "It's so nice to come home to a house full of beautiful women," he

said, tweaking Shoebootie's nose. "Boy are my dogs tired," Ben said, his nightly signal to Alice to help him take his steel-toed boots off.

"Let's eat first" I said, "before everything gets cold."

I didn't want Alice down at his feet every night unlacing and pulling off his boots, smelling his stinky feet. I'd asked him to stop, but he always said she liked it, said she was Daddy's girl. It was true that he'd always favored her, the first baby to bear his likeness in miniature. Mama said that babies always look more like their daddies because men felt they needed some kind of proof that the baby was theirs. Women had all the proof they needed.

When we brought Alice home from the hospital, he couldn't stop looking at her. I even caught him once holding her tiny face up to the mirror next to his. "We sure make beautiful babies together," he'd said to me when I interrupted this first act of mutual adoration. "I can't wait to see what our boys will look like."

The way her eyelashes flickered when she slept, the way her arms unfurled when she woke up yawning and stretching fascinated him. He would watch her work her tiny lips around my nipples, her fists pressing into the sides of my breast as if I wasn't flowing fast enough for her. "Let me try that," he'd said to me.

"No, Ben," I said, laughing at his sense of humor. "That's just sick."

"But they look so good, so big, so yummy."

"They're for the baby," I said back.

"I want to taste you; I miss you," he said, his voice deep and husky. He stroked the breast that Alice was about to get switched over to, squeezing some milk onto his fingers.

"Ouch! Stop it, Ben. I'm serious."

He stopped, but the tent sticking up from his boxer shorts proved to me that he didn't want to. "Mama is so mean to me," he said to Alice. "You're such a lucky little baby."

We let her sleep, in the bed with us, even though Mama said it would spoil her, said we might roll over on her in the middle of the night. Ben imposed a ban on rolling over in bed so nothing would happen to his little girl.

"It must be nice to have a man who is so punctual," Mama said after she had blessed the food and cut up Shoebootie's pork chop. If you don't bless the food, you'll get the runs. The pink prenatal horse pills with iron I had to take made sure that never happened to me, so our food never got blessed unless Mama came over for dinner. "Sometimes I had to keep dinner warm for hours for your father," she said.

"Takes me exactly twenty-two minutes to get home," Ben said, talking and chewing at the same time, "from the time the whistle blows until I walk in the door."

"That's just amazing to me because men are almost always late," Mama said. "Most of my baby boys were late, practically every one of them." Mama lowered her voice like she was telling us a secret. "I don't know if I've told you this, but you can make this baby boy come faster by drinking castor oil and orange juice and--"

"Hannah," Ben interrupted, "would you watch what you're doing? You're going to spill ... Oh damn, there it is."

Mama jumped up to wipe up the milk, so I just kept feeding the baby and trying not to look at the cud swirling around Ben's mouth. Even from the other end of the table,

I could hear him chewing and chomping, breathing loud through his nose, gulping air and food at the same time.

I felt hungry but sick, empty but full. I felt sickened because I knew I was eating only to put something inside me to throw up later. That's what dinner meant to me. It used to be just Ben and me, sitting side by side, drinking wine from the same glass. Then, it was Alice in her highchair between us. She moved to the booster seat, and with each baby we sat farther apart until he was at one end drinking beer from the bottle and I was at the other end screwing tops onto sippy cups and drinking milk or juice from a glass all my own.

"Hey, girls," Ben said, ignoring the fact that Hannah was still upset. She'd received the brunt of his disappointment when she wasn't the son he'd been expecting, and he'd never learned to hide it. Hannah knew that Alice was his favorite. The sting of being unable to produce a boy must not have been so bad by the tiny Shoebootie came because he doted on her. He was indifferent to Emmy, which was a shame because she really was a sweet-tempered baby, and Mama said she'd probably be a little towhead when she sprouted hair. Ben could be downright mean to Hannah, who just wanted some attention from him, so I knew she wasn't crying over spilled milk. "Guess whose birthday it is tomorrow?" he said. Translation: "I didn't forget your birthday this year, and I didn't forget our last argument, either."

"It's Mama's," Alice said. "Grandma brought her over a new dress. Doesn't she look pretty, Daddy?"

For the first time since he came home, Ben really looked at me all wrapped up under the big top. "She looks very pretty," he said. Translation: "You'll never get your

figure back." Suddenly I was full to the top. I could feel the baby's head jammed up under my ribcage and its limbs trying to punch their way out. Elbows and knees, feet and fists beat across my stomach in a steady drum roll.

"Mama's belly dancing," Shoebootie said, making everyone laugh.

I had a sudden vision of myself as a circus attraction, my huge belly sticking out between a grass skirt and a too small halter top that probably wouldn't even cover the scar ten-month-old Alice left when she bit me with her four tiny teeth. I never breastfed again. Bite me once, shame on you. Bite me twice, I wasn't going to take the chance-- not even when Mama said it would help the babies come farther apart, that and drinking tea made from Queen Anne's Lace.

"We'll do these dishes right up," Mama said, already starting to clear the table.

"This will be the last time," Ben said. "Tomorrow, for mama's birthday, they are delivering, right here to our house, a brand new Maytag dishwasher!" His excited tone caused the girls to jump up and down celebrating even though they probably had no idea what a dishwasher was. Even the baby pounded her hands on the tray of her highchair.

"A dishwasher?" I said. "You bought me a dishwasher? I ..."

"You don't need a dishwasher," Mama said. "You got four of them coming right up. Isn't that right, girls?"

"You son-of-a-bitch," I screamed at Ben and ran into the bathroom.

I was on my knees in front of the toilet crying and throwing up in the blue water when Mama walked right in. "What is wrong with you swearing at your husband in front of the children like that? He's out there clearing the table and washing the dishes after working all day. You ought to be ashamed of yourself carrying on like this."

"I hate him," I sobbed, wanting her to hug me but resting my head against the cold porcelain. "I do, Mama. I do. Everyone thinks he's so perfect. You think he's so perfect. You don't know him like I know him."

"Shhh," Mama soothed, pulling my hair out of the toilet. "It's just the hormones talking."

"It's not the hormones. Hormones don't talk. People talk. Can't you see me talking? Can't you hear me?"

"The whole neighborhood can hear you," Mama said. "Now get a hold of yourself this instant."

Yes, ma'am.

There I was going to turn twenty-six the next day, and I still listened to my mother, still did everything she said. Alice was only six, and she barely listened to me anymore. She rolled her eyes every time I asked her to get me a diaper or to hold one of her sisters' hands. She stomped around the house, doing what she was told, biding her time until her daddy came home to rescue her from the monotony of me. Then she'd fetch him beers or rub his shoulders or help him burn the trash.

"That's better," Mama said, trying to clean me up with a warm washcloth. "I've never seen anyone still so sick so late in their pregnancy. You poor honey. It'll all be worth it, though. As soon as you take one look at that beautiful new baby, you'll forget all about this. You know that. Don't you?"

I nodded as Mama helped me up off the floor. I wouldn't forget, though, because that's just a load of bull they tell girls who are scared of labor'. I remember every hour of every labor, and I know Mama did, too. In the hospital I thought about how Mama told

me she'd never made a sound and thanked God after every contraction. Let's just say I said some things to God, too, as I lay there in a hospital bed racked with back spasms and stomach cramps hour after hour. I remember being alone and thirsty, scared, and embarrassed when every once in a while the doctor would breeze in the door and stick a gloved hand between my legs and up inside my body. Nurses smiled the exact same smile whether they were saying "not much longer now" or "everything looks good down there" or "it's time for your shave and enema."

This time, I'd decided, I would wait until the last possible minute to go to the hospital. That was the trick: spend as little time as possible in there before the birth and as much time as possible afterwards.

"I didn't want this baby, Mama," I said, sitting on the closed toilet lid. "And I didn't want a dishwasher, either. I asked Ben to get himself fixed for my birthday." Actually, I had begged him to do it. I was willing to get my tubes tied after the baby came, but the doctor said I needed Ben's permission to do it. The condescending bastard treated me like a tardy schoolgirl who forgot to bring a note from home. *Dear Doctor, My wife has my permission to get herself cut open and tied in knots so I don't knock her up again.*

"You didn't," Mama gasped. "You can't possibly expect him to go through all that pain when he doesn't even have a son yet to carry on his name."

I didn't answer because the girls were squealing about something flying around the house. We left the bathroom and stepped into the chaos a bird causes flying around in a house full of little girls. Shoebootie and Emmy were on the floor pointing at it, fascinated by the quick streaks of green that were the near invisible wings of a baby

hummingbird. It was no bigger than my thumb, but it buzzed through the house like a swarm of bees. Alice kept screaming, "It's going to sting us," until Ben told her it was a little bird and not a giant bee. Ben grabbed the broom and tried swatting it back towards the open window.

Mama mumbled "this is not good, not a good sign at all," while I comforted Hannah in the folds of the tent dress.

"Is Daddy going to kill it?" she asked me.

"I hope not, honey."

"I bet her mama is looking for her right now," she said. "Poor mama birdy."

Ben didn't get a chance to kill it because the tiny bird flew into the windowpane and broke its neck. The sudden stillness of the lightning fast wings, their rainbow streaks cut off in mid-buzz, its bent needle nose with its little black tongue hanging out fascinated the girls and me. Alice, Shoebootie, and I moved in for a closer look.

"A bird in the house brings a death in the house," Mama said.

"Don't touch that filthy thing," Ben said, scooping the dead bird up with a newspaper. "The only death this bird was forecasting was its own." He took the baby bird and flushed it down the toilet. Maybe he would have buried it if he'd thought it was forecasting the death of his only son.

Hannah watched closely as the hummingbird circled around and down.

"I thought it was coming for me," Mama said.

I thought it was coming for me.

"Mama looks tired" Ben said to the girls. Translation: "You look like hell." "Why don't you lie down on the couch for awhile?" he asked me. "Come on, girls. Let's

go get some ice cream so your mama can have some peace and quiet." Translation: "I don't want to be seen in public with you, and I don't want to stay here with you either. You need a big fat ice cream cone like you need a hole in the head." He picked up Emmy and bounced her on his arm.

"You are such a good man, Ben," Mama said, "so considerate."

"Would you care to join us for some ice cream?" he asked her, racking up some more brownie points with the mother-in-law.

"No, but thanks. I better get going. I haven't been home all day because the girls and I had some things to do. Didn't we, girls?" Mama said. Translation: "You are incompetent."

"Kiss grandma and mama goodbye," Ben said. They kissed us, and Ben kissed me on the cheek. "Mama smells like puke," he said, depositing the baby on what was left of my lap.

"Why aren't you taking the baby?" I asked him. He hadn't even washed her off when I was in the bathroom, and the bananas had dried into a hard film on her cheeks. She needed a diaper change, too.

"Well, three out of four ain't bad," Mama said, hustling them out the door like they were dinner guests who had witnessed the bad behavior of her unruly child. "Bye girls," she said. "Be good for Daddy."

"Come on, Emmy," Mama said, taking the baby off me. Mama groaned while picking her up. "Let Grandma give you a nice bath and put your jammies on. That's a good baby." She turned to me and said, "You just lie there and get some rest. I've never

seen you this way, and I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. I do believe that baby's backwards because a backwards baby twists your mind all in knots."

"I'm not twisted; I'm just really tired."

"Have you been crawling like I said?"

"Yes," I said and closed my eyes. "Mama, I think this baby is going to kill me."

"You shush up right now," she said. "Never say bad thoughts out loud because the devil will hear you."

I dreamed Alice was run over by the school bus, and I woke Ben up with my crying but didn't tell him why. I dreamed Hannah fell in the toilet and drowned, as if a four-year-old could just up and drown in a toilet. I dreamed that I rolled over in bed and suffocated Shoebootie and Emmy, both of them crushed face first into the mattress under the massive weight of their mother.

I wondered if that was what Mama meant when she said the best mothers lay in bed at night and worry about their children. Maybe she got it backwards and it's the worst mothers who dream dreams like that. I wondered what she would say to see me crawling around on the living room carpet at two in the morning after another bad dream. I wondered if the doctor was wrong about everything being okay with the baby, and I wondered if Mama was right about it being in there backwards.

I dreamed the baby was crying, screaming at the top of her lungs and I couldn't find her. I crawled and crawled, but I never got any closer to her. Ben shook me awake. "What are you doing sleeping out here on the floor?" He was holding Emmy, and her

cheeks were covered in tears and snot. She took quick ragged breaths. "Are you sick?" he asked me.

"I've been sick for nine months, if you haven't noticed," I told him as he helped me up off the floor. I sat on the couch and held my hands out for Emmy to come to me, but she burrowed herself deeper into Ben's shoulder. Who could blame her? "I just want this kid out of me," I said.

"I know you do," he said, bouncing the baby, "but I don't want you trying to hurry anything along. Mark my words: if you listen to your mother and try to go into labor by drinking castor oil and orange juice, all you'll get for your trouble is the shits."

I just shrugged even though I knew it was true because I'd taken a big dose of it when Hannah was overdue. That year, Independence Day came and went with me in the bathroom for most of it.

"He'll come when he's ready," Ben said.

"Quit saying it's a boy. What are you going to do if it's a girl?"

"I guess I'll take out some stock in Kotex," he laughed, putting the baby down on the floor. She crawled into the corner and grabbed her pink telephone, and I knew we'd be up another hour or two until she got tired again. Ben should've gone to her crib, changed her pants, given her a drink and a kiss, and told her to go back to sleep.

"That's not funny, Ben." I started crying because he didn't know anything. "You know what I mean."

"I know, honey," he said. "You know I'll love this baby no matter what it is. You've got to stop getting so upset. It's not good for the baby."

"The baby! That's all you care about. When was the last time you asked about me? Or tried to help me?"

"I'm helping you right now," he said, nodding towards Emmy.

"Big help you are," I said, crying harder.

"I'm sorry," he said and kneeled between my legs to lay his head on my stomach. He rubbed it with his hands like a giant crystal ball that would tell him what to say next. "I'm sorry," he said as his fingers blazed fire trails across the too tight skin and his head pushed heavily on the spot where my belly button used to be. I shoved him off me so I could breathe. "Is it really so bad being with me?" he asked from the middle of the floor. "Do you find my touch that offensive?"

I didn't answer.

"I made one mistake, and you'll never let me forget it," he said. "Doesn't your mother always say to forgive and forget?"

"Let's not bring my mother into this," told him. "And I can't forget it, Ben."

"I've apologized over and over. I just lost control; I couldn't help myself; it had been so long." He had tears in his eyes. I had never seen him cry before, and the sight of his tears made mine stop. "I try to treat you right, provide for you," he said with his hands up in the air. "I've never laid a hand on you."

"That's bull--"

"You're right, but I do the best I can," he said, his voice cracking.

"Do you?" I whispered.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. For the millionth time, I'm sorry. I wish I could take it back. I know I hurt you. Oh god, I knew you weren't ready so soon after having

Emmy," he said, and the baby crawled over to him as if he'd called her. He picked her up and squeezed her tight. "Tell Mama Daddy's sorry," he said to her, sobbing into the belly of her flowered pajamas. "Tell her he'll do anything she says. Tell her I'm so ..."

"Ben, you're scaring her," I said. "Stop it." I took the baby from him and walked down the hall to her crib in the corner of our bedroom. Alice, Hannah, and Shoebootie slept in the room next door to ours. I had no idea where we would put the new baby. By the time I got Emmy back to sleep, Ben was sleeping on the living room floor next to the pink telephone.

I left him there and went to bed.

The morning my water broke, two days after my due date, my first instinct was to run right to the hospital. With all my other babies, the doctor had stuck a long knitting needle looking thing inside me and broken the water for me. Apparently, he was getting paid for something I was perfectly capable of doing all by myself. I sat on the toilet until the clear fluid stopped running out of me: Shoebootie pointed at me the whole time. "Mama pee long time," she giggled. Hannah tried to mop the mess up on the floor and made it worse. I asked Alice to put the baby in the playpen and take the other girls outside to play.

They walked the half-mile to Mama's house without me even knowing they were gone. "These girls could have been killed," Mama said when she brought them back in her car. "Where were you while they were walking all the way to my house?"

"In the bathroom," I answered. Apparently, I didn't need all those pre-delivery enemas, either. "I've got the diarrhea, and I've been throwing up again."

"I bet the baby's coming in the next day or two," Mama said. "That's the body's way of getting ready."

I didn't have any pains yet, just a heaviness pressing down on me. I didn't tell Mama about my water breaking? Because I knew she would call Ben and make me go to the hospital. I the thought about calling the doctor, but I knew he would tell me to come right in. Besides, he couldn't do anything for me that I wasn't already doing for myself

Mama said, "A late baby is--"

"A boy, right?"

"No, I was going to say a late baby is a bashful baby," Mama said. "Just look at Hannah and how shy she is. She was overdue, too. Wasn't she? Or was it Shoebootie?"

"It was Hannah," I said.

I asked Mama to change Emmy's pants for me while I made tomato soup and tuna fishy sandwiches that turned my stomach. Mama stayed for lunch, but I didn't eat or drink anything because that's what they always said in the hospital. Before she left, Mama inspected the suitcase I had packed for the hospital, pronounced yellow a nice neutral color to bring the baby home in, and went over the plan with me again. As soon as I went into labor, I was to call her to come over to watch the girls. Mama would stay with us for a total of eight days because she said it would take one week and one day for my insides to go back where they belonged after being pushed all over by the baby.

Ben would drive me to the hospital and sit in the waiting room in a comfortable chair while I lay flat on my back with my legs strapped wide open in the cold metal stirrups, my body working against gravity. Then, he would leave me there in the hospital, exhausted but unable to sleep, with nurses coming in every half hour to press

their claws into my deflating stomach making gigantic clots of blood burst past my stitches and onto the disposable pads they'd placed under my ass. I would lay there wondering if I'd be able to tell if they mixed the babies up and gave me the wrong one to take home while he passed out cigars and sucked down free drinks at Mr. Lucky's like he'd done something worth smoking and drinking over. Then, he would come home and get waited on by my mama, who thought all that men have to do is burn the trash and make sure the windows had screens or storms, depending on the season.

The afternoon and evening passed with random contractions alternating with bouts of vomiting.

Ben made the girls soup, sandwiches, and Kool-Aid when it became obvious that I had no intention of cooking dinner. The girls cried and whined because they didn't want to eat what he'd made, but Ben made them sit there until it was all gone. No one cleared the table or washed the dishes.

I ignored them and concentrated on making myself comfortable. I took a shower, letting the hot water beat on the small of my back when I doubled over with another vicelike pain. I went to bed and slept in fits, changing positions often, rolling side to side like a lurching ship, trying anything that would offer a few minutes of comfort. I found if I knelt on the floor and rocked back and forth with the rhythm of the contraction I could ride it through to the end without falling off. I passed two hours like that, on my hands and knees with my wide ass up in the air and my belly nearly scraping against the floor, until the contractions merged together and lasted longer than the time in between them.

I crawled out the bedroom door, down the hall, and found Ben sleeping on the couch with Emmy sleeping on his chest. Alice, Hannah, and Shoebootie were asleep on the living room floor, still in the clothes they'd worn the day before.

I shook Ben on the shoulder and whispered that it was time. He left me there and called Mama and the doctor, telling them that the pains had just started, had come on fast and hard.

"The doctor said to hurry," Ben said, trying to help me off the floor. "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

"I can't, Ben," I said, unable to get up even with his hands jammed under my armpits pulling me up. "Help me."

"Stay there," he said and ran out of the house. He came back and propped the screen door open with a cement block. He scooped me up in his arms and carried me to the car as if I didn't weigh more than he did. "Maybe we should go now; you don't look too good. Your lips are cracked and bleeding."

My nightgown was stuck to me, and my dark nipples and pubic hair were visible though the material made see-through by my sweat. "I need a robe," I said, bucking in the seat from another contraction.

Ben slammed the car door in my face and jumped in behind the wheel. "We're going now," he said, throwing the car in reverse.

"We have to wait for Mama," I said, breathing heavily. "We can't leave the girls alone."

"They'll be fine," he said, squealing the tires on the road. "She's on her way."

"What if there's a fire?" I said. "You have to go back. We should at least wake Alice up. Turn this car around right now."

Ben ignored me and kept speeding to the hospital. "It's okay, baby," he said to me. He stroked the hair out of my eyes with one hand and drove with the other. "Just hang on, honey. I'll get you there." He went through the five comers by the high school without even stopping and took Madrinski's hill so fast that I left my seat on the way down. Nothing came out as my stomach heaved over and over.

"She passed out," Ben's panicked voice came through to me. I could feel his strong arms around me, carrying me, and I could smell our sweat mingled together like it hadn't been for a long time. His lips quivered like a scared little boy, and the sight of him so vulnerable yet strong touched a part of me I'd almost forgotten about. "Help me," he screamed. "Somebody!"

"Ben," I said as he lay me on the gurney. I grabbed his shirtsleeve as they started to roll me through the double doors. "Please stay with me," I asked him, but hardly any sound came out. My tongue lay thick in my mouth, and my body felt as if it were a piece of paper someone had crinkled up and started on fire. "I need you. Please, Ben."

"I can't," he said. "You'll be okay. I'll be in as soon as it's over."

The doctor and nurses wheeled me away, and Ben just stood there, immobile. "Don't you dare leave me," I said to him, sobbing. "Ben, stay with me. It hurts so bad. Ben! You did this to me. Ben!"

"As if it doesn't take two," the doctor clucked when the door closed behind us.

"Now, little mama, don't push until we have a look see," he told me, looking under my nightgown. "Goddamn it, I told you not to push."

But I pushed. I pushed hard, up against gravity, against the doctor and his searing knife slicing me open all the way to my ass. I fought the nurses holding my shoulders down as the doctor reached inside my body, and I called for my mama and cried when I saw the rainbow wings flying in my head before I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I was alone, empty and shivering cold.

Flights of Fancy

She is late for her own funeral. I told her it would happen but never thought I was predicting the future when I said it. It's just another thing said and forgotten, until it comes true. Then suddenly it becomes significant.

Her children, my children, our closest friend, and all the tag-alongs surround me; our husbands sit behind us. We wait for the service to begin because her husband is still in the minister's office with the urn. People I've known all my life and people I've never seen before fill the pews and look impatiently at the doors and at the empty pedestal up front. The delay makes this cruel moment unbearable. I leave the inner sanctuary of the church to find the minister's office.

I find the office near the coatroom, and through the half open door, I see her husband yelling into the phone. "What do you mean you can't bring her ashes to the church? No, I couldn't possibly-But I called the funeral home and they said to call the post office. That's you. I don't care about your supervisor." He bangs the desk and the minister flinches. "No, no, no! The funeral was supposed--- It's already-How can we do that?" He slams the phone down and rests his head on the minister's desk. He's

crying into his arms and telling the robed man, "I just can't deal with this, Father. Or is it Pastor? I don't know. We never went-I know you have a wedding in a few hours, and I-We'll just go ahead anyway. No one will know she's not in the urn."

I rush in the office and insist on running down to the post office to pick her up. We can't have her funeral without her. How can he even consider it? I want to slap him. Why hadn't he personally accompanied her body to the crematorium and hand-carried her ashes back to us? How could he let her be sent through the mail?

The Year of the Hypochondriac

"Let's get the tents up before it gets dark," Liz directed, her loud voice carrying across the forest. She clapped her large hands together in front of the tired hikers. Liz was an intimidating wall of a woman, tall with wide shoulders, her body casting the others into a shadow from the setting sun, her tone spurring them to action. "Chop, chop! Night comes early in the Alleghenies." She surveyed the area with sharp eyes and bent down to move some branches. "This looks like a good place, not too many roots or rocks."

The hypochondriac sat on her backpack and whined, "My back is killing me from that heavy pack. I may have slipped a disc again. My knee feels a bit tender, and I think I--"

"If you couldn't handle it, you shouldn't have come," Diane snapped at her while unrolling the dome tent. Her thin body, all elbows and knees, moved efficiently. She blew up at a piece of her black hair that had escaped her ponytail. "Hiking is hard work. You knew the deal when you--"

"Hey, now," Sarah soothed and pulled Diane off to the side. "Why don't you get the fire going while we set up camp? I'll do the tent." When the two were out of earshot she said, "I could just kill Liz for bringing that one. We're tired, too. I mean look at me, I'm filthy, and all she can do is complain, the big faker."

Finally camp was set up. Sarah washed her light blonde hair and compact body in a small stream and changed into fresh clothes. She rinsed out her socks and underwear and hung them on the short clothesline they'd strung between two trees. Liz prepared a canned fruit, cup of soup, box of crackers dinner for the group and disappeared into the tent as soon as the meal was finished. Diane tended the fire as Sarah rinsed off the cups and spoons, leaving them to dry on a rock.

The hypochondriac lay in the hammock complaining of a migraine. "I can't believe you carried this hammock all the way up the mountain," she said to Diane. "Wasn't it heavy for you?"

"Not really," Diane said throwing a log on the fire and resisting the urge to tell her that they were only in the foothills and not the mountains. "I only carried essentials: the hammock, a toothbrush and change of underwear, my watercolor supplies, a couple of blankets, water, and fruit and bagels for our breakfast tomorrow."

"That's it?" the hypochondriac asked. "My pack had to weigh fifty pounds, maybe more. I must have pinched a nerve in my shoulder to have such an excruciating headache right now. You got any aspirin?"

"I just told you I don't," Diane said, throwing a silent "help me" to Sarah with her eyes.

"Hey, Liz!" Sarah yelled at the tent. "You got that joint rolled yet? Hurry up already!"

Liz emerged from the tent with a fat joint smoking between her lips, imitating W.C. Fields. "Keep your pants on, kid. You're bothering me." Sarah and Diane laughed.

The hypochondriac was stunned. "You smoke pot? I mean I heard rumors, but--"

"Relax," Liz said, taking a deep hit and passing the joint to Diane. "Loosen up. It's a once a year thing. Try it; you'll like it."

"Yeah," Diane said. "Why don't you have some? It might cure what ails you."

Sarah picked up the cue and launched into an embellished catalogue of the medical benefits of marijuana, and, by the time the joint completed two rounds, the hypochondriac had joined them. They taught her how to inhale and gave her extra hits to make sure she had mastered the skill. As they watched her sleep in the hammock an hour later, they knew peer pressure was a wonderful thing.

Sarah, Diane, and Liz were the core of the group. There were other friends, from Liz's work at the clinic, from Diane's gallery, from one or another of Sarah's committees, or the local PTA, but they were considered the tag-alongs, the extras in a cast starring the three women. It was natural that other women would want to throw their lots in with theirs. They were an interesting trio. Liz was a midwife; Diane was an art teacher at the community center, and Sarah was an active volunteer married to the president of the school board. The women were funny and nice, and they went away once each year on men-free, child-free, adventure-loaded weekends that became the talk of their small town.

Gossip abounded. The clerk at the dairy-mart heard that they'd each spent close to a grand on one weekend in Atlantic City. And what with husbands and children at home! The redheaded divorcee at the Hair Barn saw the trio in the city at Antonio's Spa getting naked massages. The waitress at Pudgie's Cafe heard from the head bank teller that the three women had spent two days at a nudist colony a few years back. It was rumored that they were lesbians, or, at the very least, they swapped husbands. Many were sure the weekends were frenzied feasts of drugs, alcohol, and sex: married women getting wild. What kind of man would let his wife go white water rafting when the guides were so sexy that women brought back pictures of them? And what woman in town wouldn't want to be included in next year's trip? The group grew, and new friends joined in and dropped out. To keep track, Sarah, Diane, and Liz secretly named the trips after a different tag-along each year. The destinations and the tag-alongs varied, but the annual adventure weekend remained the one constant throughout the many changes in the lives of the three friends.

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The two of us go to my house. I wait until we're all the way upstairs before I tell her what I've done. I whisper it.

"What do you mean you stole her ashes?" She is screeching at me, her eyes wide.

"Shhhhhh!" I tell her as I close my bedroom door behind us. I don't want the kids or my husband to hear us. "You don't understand, I--"

"No, I don't understand," she says. "I don't understand anything anymore. First, our best friend falls off a ladder and dies for no reason whatsoever, and now you're telling me you stole her ashes!"

"I had to do it," I say.

"You had to?" She sinks onto my bed. "Oh my God! Why? How?"

I start to answer several times, but it's hard to talk, to know where to begin when I can't even explain it to myself. It comes out in a rush. "I-Well--When I went to the post office to pick her up and I saw that she was in a box, a little green box with dented sides and canceled stamps, taped shut so she didn't leak out, I just lost it. I don't know. I just-- I thought about how he was going to go ahead without her even being there, how he was going to let us cry over an empty urn. That's how much he thought about us."

"But, I saw the ashes," she says. "If they weren't her, then what were they?"

"They were from my fireplace," I tell her. It sounds worse when I say it aloud. "I picked her up, and when I saw her, I just came here and switched them."

"Jesus!" she says. "Where is she now?"

I start to cry, afraid of what she might say. I brace for her reaction and pull the Ziploc bag full of our best friend out of my purse.

"Well," she laughs weakly, "you could've at least used Tupperware."

The Year of the Virgin

Diane had asked Sarah and Liz to please be nice to the tag-along, whose parents owned the Eclectic Edge Art Gallery in Buffalo. It could be Diane's big break. The girl's parents also owned the small log cabin in Old Forge where they were staying, and they

owned the Ski-doo snowmobiles that they were using to explore the Adirondack trails. If they wanted to get technical, the three of them were the tag-alongs that year. Liz and Sarah had been good the entire first day, trying not to hate the poor girl merely out of jealousy over her thick honey-blonde hair (no grays there), or her perfect size five (they estimated) body, or even her generously firm breasts (that looked real, damn it). But when they heard that the tag-along was a twenty-six-year-old virgin, they couldn't contain themselves any longer. Liz burst out laughing.

Sarah turned around from the sinkful of dishes and asked, "Are you a lesbian?" She shrugged at Diane; it had just slipped out.

"No," the virgin answered, "I'm, like, saving myself for the right man."

"You're wasting it, honey," Liz said, putting another log in the fireplace. "You know what they say: Use it or lose it."

Even Diane couldn't contain herself from this curiosity. She put aside her sketchpad. "Are you telling us you've never had sex? Ever? Wow! You don't know what you're missing. Try it. You'll like it." The virgin looked about ready to cry from all the teasing, so Diane tried to make amends. "If it's against your religion or something to have sex before you're married, well, I guess I can understand that."

"No," the virgin said, "it's not that. It's that I want to wait for my soul mate, you know, the perfect match for me. When I find him, and we're married, it'll be like magic. Totally!"

Sarah burst out laughing this time. She dried her hands on the dishtowel and put her rings back on. She studied her wedding band and sighed. "You're living in a dream world, honey."

"She's right," Liz said. "What you're looking for doesn't exist."

"Oh, soul mates exist," Diane interrupted, "but it's not just one person. How can there only be one perfect man for each woman? There can't. My first husband, my very first lover, was my soul mate at the time. God, he was something-at the time. My second husband, my only other lover, is my soul mate now. And then there's my children and my friends, especially my friends."

"Shit, Diane," Sarah said. "Only two guys? You're still a virgin, too!"

Liz laughed at Sarah's teasing, but she brought the conversation back to seriousness by saying she agreed with Diane about soul mates. Liz took the virgin's hand in hers and assumed her best bedside manner. "You're setting yourself up for disappointment," she said. "There is no such thing as the perfect man or the perfect lover."

"Isn't that the truth," Sarah said, sitting down on the rug by the fire. "You need lots and lots of practice to have good sex. My husband's been practicing for fifteen years and only gets it right half the time."

"I've told you, Sarah," Diane said. "You have to teach him how to love you. Guide his body with yours. Show him what you like. It's not only his responsibility to make it good."

"That's right," Liz said. "You have to train him like a dog."

"This is, like, way more than I need to know," the virgin said, "but thank you for sharing that with me. When I get married, I'll be so sure to come to you girls for advice."

Liz couldn't let it go, especially in light of the virgin's snippy attitude. Who did she think she was calling them girls? Couldn't she take a joke? "Well if you ever want to have any kids, you better get hot on it."

Sarah started to speak, but the virgin cut her off.

"I have plenty of time to have children, thank you very much," the virgin said.

Sarah stood back up.

Liz gave the virgin a scathing look, narrowed eyes that cut as much as her sharp tongue. "Just don't expect me to deliver them."

Sarah stormed out of the cabin, leaving the door open. Liz and Diane followed and rushed to their friend. Sarah sunk to her knees in the snow, her arms crossed over her stomach, her small body shaking with sobs.

"What is it?" Diane asked. She helped Sarah to her feet. "Tell us what's wrong."

"Come on, Sarah," Liz said. "You can tell us anything."

"I-I-I hate that bitch," Sarah said.

"Who? The virgin?" Diane asked. "Why?"

"With her perfect body, and her I have plenty of time to have children," Sarah said between sobs. "I-I've been having some, some problems, and the doctor said I have to have a hysterectomy." She swallowed hard. "They're going to empty me out."

Liz said, "Why didn't you come to me? Oh my God! Are they going to do a partial or a total? Did you get a second opinion? You should have told us sooner."

At the same time Diane said, "You didn't really want to have any more kids anyway. Did you, Sarah? Isn't four enough?"

Sarah tried to answer them both at the same time. "I couldn't come to you, Liz. I knew you'd-be like this. You're my friend, not my doctor. You have a hell of a nerve, Diane! No, I didn't really want any more kids, but it was always an option. My body was the only thing I had control over; and now that's been snatched away from me, too. I'm only thirty-five, and already I'm defective. I'm not even a real woman anymore."

"Oh Sarah!" Both women gathered their friend into a circle of hugs telling her she was perfect; she was loved.

"But it's not fair," Sarah cried. "I've always been so feminine and so motherly. That's all I've ever been."

"You know that's not true," Liz said. "You're so much more than that."

"I'm not, though," Sarah said. "I couldn't even wait for my period to start, and I'll never have another one again." She raised her voice. "God! How could this happen to me?"

"That's right," Diane said. "Get angry. You have a right to rage against God or fate or whatever. Don't keep your pain inside." She shook Sarah by the shoulders. "You should scream or something."

"Yeah, scream, Sarah," Liz said. "It will help you to let it out."

Sarah gave a little scream, barely a shout, and her friends encouraged her to give more. Sarah inhaled deeply and let loose a piercing scream. "That's good; do it again," Liz said, and Sarah obeyed. "Louder, Sarah. Scream!" Liz and Diane joined her yelling at the stars.

"Now repeat after me," Diane said. "I am more than just my body. Come on, scream."

"I am more than just my body," Sarah hollered.

"Again! Louder!" Diane ordered. "Scream it with me."

"I am more than just my body!" They screamed together, the three friends in a circle of arms, their faces to the heavens. "I am more than just my body!"

"I am more than just a mother!" Liz yelled. Sarah looked at her and stepped away from the group. They pulled her back into their arms and held her there. "Come on, Sarah. Scream it. I am more than just a mother!" They all screamed together. "I am more than just a mother!"

The virgin watched from the porch as the three women screamed until their throats were raw. They ignored her questions as they stood shivering in the snow, drained.

"Now what?" Sarah asked.

"Now," Diane answered, assuming a Transylvanian accent. "It is written. We must sacrifice a virgin."

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We pour her from the bag into a lime green Tupperware container, burp and seal the lid, and tell everyone we don't know when we'll be back. Like The Year of the Geese, we don't know where we're going-just somewhere we can talk, search our memories for clues, subtle indications she may have given us that would help us know what to do. A snippet here, a moment there--passing references are all we have to work

with. Why hadn't we asked each other our plans for death? We knew her bra size, her weight, how many hours she was in labor for each baby, and how often she had sex, but something so basic, so inevitable as her death wishes, remains a mystery to us. How could we have been so careless?

"We're robbing them of their mother, you know," she says to me as soon as we leave the driveway. "Buckle up."

I reach for the seat belt and take extra long to fasten it. I don't want to think about her children. Children always manage to throw our lives out of control; they make things so complicated. "She was more than just a mother," I say, suddenly tired.

"I know," she says, reaching over to squeeze my hand. Her forearm rests on the green bowl of ashes between us. "But she was also more than just our best friend."

"I know that," I tell her. "I'm not trying to make this, this situation, about us, or about her husband, or her children. It's about her, all about her." I'm talking with my hands into the empty air, unsure if my brain and mouth can cooperate long enough to form more words. I'm lost and resort to pounding on the dash, loudly begging the sky for answers. "What would make her happy?"

"She'd be happy right now," she says, accelerating up to speed with traffic on the NYS Thruway. "Think about it: driving fast in the car, just the three of us, me passing people left and right, you raging at the heavens through my dirty windshield, running like hell, stealing ashes-Jesus! She'd love it. She'd be proud of you for just having the balls to do something like this."

"I owe it all to you guys," I say. "Without the two of you, I'd still be like before, afraid to make a decision. You found it in me, but she made me trust it." I tear up again; I have to get a hold of myself. "Tell me we're doing the right thing."

The Year of the Fruitcake

"Shhhh!" Liz whispered. "We don't want to wake up the fruitcake." She silently motioned them out the door and clicked it shut behind them.

"This is so mean," Diane said, but she stealthily followed them to the van.

"If I hear one more word about past lives or reincarnation or spirits or auras, ' Sarah said, quietly shutting the van door, "I'm going to puke."

"I wanted to kill her when we had to change hotels just because she had a bad feeling," Liz said as she drove out of the parking lot of the Madame LaRoche Hotel.

"She is a bit much sometimes," Diane said, "but I warned you guys that she was a little strange."

"Strange?" Liz said. "She's a fucking fruitcake."

"That's too harsh," Sarah said, but she laughed along with them. "Diane, you can't bring any more tag-alongs who hug trees or believe they lived a thousand years ago."

"Maybe she did," Diane said. "Why did we come to Lily Dale if we weren't going to open our minds to the possibilities? I admit I'm a little curious."

"Okay, you're right," Liz said. "I'll pull over at the first psychic sign I see."

"Why don't we go back to the hotel and visit Madame LaRoche?" Sarah asked.

"That way, when the fruitcake wakes up, she won't be mad at us."

Liz turned the van around and parked back at the hotel. The three women knocked on the screened office door, and a slight, forty-something woman in jeans and a Mickey Mouse tee shirt opened it.

"Urn-we'd like to see the psychic, Madame LaRoche," Diane said.

"I am Madame LaRoche," she said. "I've been expecting you."

"Sure you have," Liz said with a snicker.

"What's the problem?" the psychic asked. "You were expecting a gypsy skirt with a matching bandanna and gold hoop earrings? Sorry, my uniform is at the cleaners."

"Really?" Sarah asked. Diane elbowed her and asked the woman to excuse her friends.

"What has brought you to me today?" Madame LaRoche asked.

"You tell me," Liz said and felt Diane's other elbow jab her in the side.

"Your medicine guides have brought you here," the woman told them. "Sit and I will show you your guides on the journey." She led the women to a Formica covered kitchen table in the next room and offered them coffee and donuts. "My Earth Mother Guide is the goose," she told them as she gathered cups, sugar, and cream to place on the table next to the steaming coffeepot. "It represents the power and grace of the woman as she chooses her path." She pointed her finger at Sarah. "You wish for this guide but will not take the necessary steps." The psychic sat down and shuffled a large blue deck of cards with yellow lightning streaks on the backs. She eyed the women individually.

"You," she said, pointing at Diane, "have had many guides throughout your lifetime. And you," she pointed at Liz, "can not realize that you too must sometimes accept guidance."

Madame LaRoche dealt each woman a card containing a colorful picture of her medicine guide. For over an hour they talked with the psychic, answering her questions, drinking her coffee, and listening to her advice. She explained to each woman what her guide signified. Diane's card showed a black-raven, to signify the changeability of form and shape as the bringer of magic. Madame LaRoche said Diane might be psychically gifted and should seek to develop her potential powers. Liz received the bat, which represented the cycles of birth and rebirth. Not only was Liz a sympathetic aide to women through their cycles of fertility, she also could help them adjust to their inner cycles of spiritual growth. Sarah's card contained the Moose, the keeper of self-esteem; Sarah needed to recognize and honor the value of the gifts she could give to others.

On their way out the door, they each thanked Madame LaRoche and gave her forty dollars.

"Wow!" Diane said.

"Yeah, wow," Liz said. "She just made \$120.00 dollars in an hour."

"But wasn't that wild?" Sarah asked "I mean she practically came right out and said that Liz was a midwife. And me being the. Moose- just think about it. Bats and birds hang out in the antlers of moose and eat the insects off their backs. It's just like us, and then there's Di--"

"God, Sarah," Liz said, rolling her eyes. "Listen to yourself."

Diane said, "Who's the fruitcake now?"

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The shores of Lake Ontario are rocky. Mini-waves lick at our feet. Dead sea urchins and broken shells pepper the beach. The white belly of a bloated trout shrivels in the afternoon sun. We make our way to a large, jutting rock, slippery green near the water, but flat and dry on top. We sit with her ashes between us, plucking dried moss and leaves off the rock and throwing them into the water. Gulls swoop into the lake and circle around sailboats. The air smells fishy. I tell her it takes me back to The Year of the Thief.

"Don't remind me," she groans. "What an adventure that was. What she tried to do for us that year--well, it was ..."

"She was the best," I answer. "She didn't care what anyone thought. I always loved that about her most."

"I loved the way she just said what she had on her mind." She pats the bowl, strokes it. "You would have told us your opinion on the matter, wouldn't you? You wouldn't have wasted your breath on all this discussion. God," she says, "I'm talking to a bowl full of ashes! Who's the fruitcake now?"

"Did you know that he planned to put her urn on display in their china cabinet?" I ask her. "She would hate that."

"She probably would," she says, "but what right do we have to decide? He's her husband; we're just the best friends."

"We were more than that," I tell her. "We loved her more than he did."

"Not more love," she answers, "just different love,"

"But we were kinder to her," I say. "We would never hurt her the way he did." I search my mind for instances, examples. I scrutinize even his smallest offenses-the times she cried to us because he forgot her birthday, fell asleep when she was talking to him, couldn't get it up. Then there were the big ones: the time she suspected he was having an affair, the way he'd pressured her into having another baby, and his selfishness in not giving her enough space to grieve the stillborn infant, her only daughter. I'd seen him embarrass her in front of us without even realizing it. Most damning of all, what I can't seem to let go, he wanted to have her funeral without her.

She sighs and gets off the rock, taking the ashes with her. "We can't forgive him because we didn't love him. She obviously did, or she wouldn't have been with him."

"But did he make her happy?" If she, like me, lived for those weekends away, I have to wonder how she wouldn't want to be free for eternity. "Would he have made her happy forever?"

"What is happiness, anyway?" she asks. "An absence of pain?" She's on the beach watching me dismount from the rock. "If that's true, then no one in the whole world is really happy. Wherever she is right now, she's already happy. She doesn't feel any pain. We're the ones whose chests ache with the emptiness of her, who can't--"

Her tears, the weight of our shared suffering, make me lose my balance. I stand ankle deep in the frigid water wondering if we'll ever be happy again.

The Year of the Thief

"Let's take it," the thief said, pointing at the semi-hidden inflatable raft in the bushes. "No one ever need know."

"We can't just steal it," Sarah said.

"But our canoe is so danged small what with the four of us and that cooler there," the thief whined. "We sittin' so low; it's a miracle we ain't takin' on water."

They pulled the canoe up to shore, Liz steering in the back, Diane guiding in the front, and the thief and Sarah huddled in the middle. They got out to inspect the raft. It was rubber with a canvas-camouflaged cover, almost as long as the canoe and twice as wide.

"What a nice ride," Diane said, stretching her long legs. She walked over and helped the thief pull the raft out of the bushes. "Sarah, untie that rope."

"Oh my God," Liz said. "It says right on it *Property of the New York State Department of Conservation*. We could go to jail."

"We're not going to go to jail," Diane said. "Sarah's got it untied; get in." The three women and the thief got in the raft and floated away.

The thief: a.k.a. the redheaded divorcee from the Hair Barn, couldn't believe it. The three infamous women, out of sentimentality for the place where they'd first met, had finally invited her on one of their wild weekends; she'd have something to talk about at work for months. It had been pretty tame up until they'd stolen the raft. They tied the canoe alongside the raft and started drinking beers from the cooler. Each woman lounged in a corner of the raft, letting the sun bum her skin and admiring the peaceful beauty of Cranberry Lake. Rowboats and canoes glided by in the distance, too far away to make out faces. Diane produced a bottle of peach schnapps, and they passed it around, proposing toast after toast to the Hair Barn. They ate a floating lunch of lo-cal Slim Jims, turkey jerky, and granola bars.

"Ya' know, Diane," the thief said, "you should come in an' let me touch up that little bit o' gray ya' got goin' there. I been doin' Liz's and Sarah's fer years now."

"No thanks," Diane said. "I like the hair up there to match the hair down there."

Liz and Sarah burst out laughing, and a chunk of granola got lodged in Liz's throat.

Diane continued, "Think about it. First you're a blonde or a brunette or whatever."

Liz gasped for air and grabbed her throat.

"Then," Diane continued, "it's just natural to go gray, then white, and then you die. Why should I try to hide it? I'm not afraid to grow old-much."

Liz's face turned red, and she waved her arms frantically to get the attention of her friends. Sarah finally noticed and climbed over to Liz. She asked Liz if she was choking, if she could cough. Liz gave her the look, so Sarah got behind her and did the Heimlich Maneuver. "God," Liz said when she could talk, "it sure took you long enough to save my life."

"For you, of all people," Sarah said, "I had to follow the proper medical procedure."

"Well thanks, smart ass," Liz said, her breathing returning to normal.

"Are you okay?" Diane asked.

"I guess," Liz said. She reached into the water and worked a large handful through her short brown hair. "God, I'm hot!"

"Me too," Diane said, and she took off her shirt and bra and lay back in the raft.

"That looks too comfortable," Liz said and took off her shirt, too. The thief looked about ready to pee her pants, like she thought they were going to get it on in the raft right there in front of her.

"Come on, Sarah," Diane said, lowering her voice to make it sexy. "Take off your shirt, too. You know you want to."

"No, thanks," Sarah said, realizing what Diane was up to. You have to feed the gossip hounds once in a while or they turn on you. "I think I'll climb into the canoe and roll a joint."

The thief watched Sarah climb in the canoe, and she looked back and forth between the topless women, speechless. She took a giant slug of the schnapps and said, "Yeah. Fuckin' aye yeah!" The thief stood up in the raft and tore off her shirt and bra and threw them in the raft. She picked up the bottle and said, "Here's to the fuckin' Hair Barn." She took a big swig and whooped into the air. The thief jumped up and down on the raft like it was a trampoline, hooting and hollering, her breasts bouncing up and down.

The raft was unbalanced because Liz and Diane lay on the same side of it. The thief jumped too high and the raft tipped up on its side. The sudden movement threw the thief into the canoe and flung Liz and Diane into the water between the canoe and the raft. Liz hung onto the side of the canoe, bleeding from her forehead. Sarah tried to right the raft without spilling the canoe, but Diane was tangled in the ropes under the water.

The thief was hysterical in the rocking canoe, screaming and crying, saying Diane was drowning. Sarah dove under the water, untangled the ropes from Diane, and brought her to the surface. Liz and the thief righted the raft.

"Oh my God," Liz said, helping Sarah push Diane up into the raft. "Are you all right?" Liz heaved Sarah into the raft behind Diane, and then Sarah helped Liz up over the side. Beer cans and Slim Jim wrappers floated around them on the lake and in the raft.

"Holy shit!" the thief yelled. "Here comes a boat. Where's my shirt?"

Diane lay coughing in the raft while Sarah inspected the cut on Liz's forehead, a minor surface wound. The thief searched the flooded raft for their shirts, but she only found her own and quickly put it on. Diane and Liz crossed their arms over their chests as the motorized rowboat drew alongside.

"What have we here?" the uniformed sheriff asked. The young conservation officer just stared at the wet women. "Stolen government property? Boating while intoxicated? Indecent exposure? You ladies mind putting some clothes on?"

"We can't," Diane said.

"We lost them," Liz said.

"Well, I seem to have lost a raft," the conservation officer said. "Wait a minute. Is this, could that be my raft? Why, yes, I believe it is my raft." He threw Liz and Diane each a lifejacket. "Put these on."

"You know," Diane said, "it's not illegal anymore for women to go topless."

"Is that right?" the sheriff asked. "Well, stealing is still a crime, and whose bag of marijuana is that floating in the canoe?"

"It ain't mine," the thief said. "I--"

"It's mine," Diane said, fastening the life vest around her. "It's all my fault, and I accept responsibility for everything. It was my idea to borrow the raft and I brought--"

"Save it for the judge," the sheriff said. "Let's all go for a ride to the Cranberry County Jail."

"We don't usually do stuff like this." Sarah started crying. "We can't go to jail."

"Isn't there some way we could just pay a fine or something and forget this ever happened?" Liz asked.

"Are you trying to bribe me?" the sheriff asked.

"No," Liz answered, "I just thought--"

"You just thought you could come to my town and pollute my lake." The sheriff looked at the debris floating in the water. "This is the water supply for the entire county."

"It's not like we did it on purpose," Diane said. "It was an accident--"

"How's a thousand dollars sound?" Liz asked him. Sarah gasped.

"You brought drugs--"

"I told you," Diane said. "Those were mine. Just take--"

"Two thousand," Liz said, and shot Diane a look to shut her up.

"Three," the conservation officer said and shrugged at the sheriff.

Liz said, "Will you take a check?"

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"We could give her back to her family."

"We could split the ashes between the two of us and take her on wild weekends."

"We could throw her off a cliff and let her fly with the birds."

"We could just wait and make a decision later."

"We could sprinkle her down the boardwalk in Atlantic City."

"We could follow the geese up to Canada and send her off in a canoe."

"We could take her to Cranberry Lake and hope she pollutes their water supply."

"We could put her in a hammock in the mountains and let the breeze blow her away."

"We could mix her in with some dip and feed her to the PTA."

"We could go to Lily Dale and ask Madame LaRoche to find out what we should do."

"We could send her on a rafting trip in the Grand Canyon."

"We could roll her up and smoke her in a joint, make her a part of us."

"We could ask all the tag-alongs what they think we should do."

"We could just do what we already know she would want us to do."

"We could," I say, and I know she's right.

The Year of the Geese

"Let's go!" Diane said, throwing her small bag in the back seat and climbing in after it.

Liz tromped on the gas and asked, "Where to, ladies?"

"I don't care. Anywhere," Sarah said, firing up a joint. "We're free at last." She inhaled deeply and handed the joint to Liz.

"I'll pass," Liz said. "Jesus, Sarah! Couldn't you have at least waited until we were out of town?"

"No," Sarah said, passing the joint to Diane. "I couldn't wait. It's been hell-the kids have got to go here; they've got to go there; they need this; they need that. The book fair is next week, and I still haven't found enough people to work it. We've been talking about having my mother-in-law move in with us. God!"

"You know," Diane said, handing the joint back to Sarah. "You can tell these people no once in awhile."

Sarah said, "I try, but it's not like I work or anything."

"Oh, you work," Liz said. "You work hard."

"I sure do," Sarah said, and put her feet on the dash. She reclined her seat until she lay in the back next to Diane. She handed her the joint. "Hey, you guys," Sarah said. "Look at all those geese."

The sky was striped; the setting sun blended pink and blue layers into purple. Lines of Canadian geese flew in black V's across the sky, their green heads leading the way, followed by long, ringed necks. Their wings flapped in varied rhythms. They glided fast with purpose, together yet separate, sleek in their awareness of their destination.

"Let's follow them home," Diane said. "Follow those geese!"

Liz took the first road heading north. "How do you know they're going home?" she asked. "Maybe they really live in the south."

"Maybe they're torn between two places," Sarah said. "Don't be such a bogart with that doopie, Diane."

"Oh my God," Diane said, handing it to her. "Aren't we snippy today?"

"I'm sorry," Sarah said. "I've been so stressed. I-"

"Tell me about it," Liz said, taking another turn to follow the geese.

"What would happen if we never went back?" Sarah asked. "What if we just kept following the geese and stayed wherever they led us?"

"We'd go back home," Liz said. "We always go back."

"We would have to go back," Diane said.

Sarah said, "I wonder why it's almost always men who go out to buy a pack of cigarettes, or fill the car up with gas, or some shit like that, and never come back again. You can't tell me that we don't ever think about it."

"Oh, we think about it," Liz said. "We just don't do it. If more women did that, the world as we know it would cease to exist. There would be chaos."

"Think how liberating it would be, though," Sarah said. "No one to answer to, no one making demands, no one to take care of." She sighed. "But I'd have to go back for my children; I always go back for the children."

"It's about more than the kids, though," Liz said. "It's about choices. We choose to step out of our lives for one weekend a year, and then we choose to step back into them." She pounded the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. "It's all about choices."

"Pull over," Diane said. "The geese are landing."

Liz pulled the car onto the shoulder of the narrow, bumpy road. They were in a swamp surrounded by acres of standing water, some slick with lime-green algae, some obscured by dense patches of cattails. Tall, leafless tree trunks pointed with broken

branches to the dusk-darkened sky. The geese separated from their straight lines and skillfully landed on the water's surface.

The three women got out of the car, stretched their limbs, and watched the geese. Liz reached for a cattail and ripped it out of the water. Sarah got a blanket out of the trunk and spread it out, patting the spaces next to her in invitation. Diane sat down with her sketchbook and began to draw the rough outlines of the landscape. They sat without speaking, listening to the conversations of the geese.

"I'm pregnant," Liz said, breaking the quiet. "I can't believe it. I just lost all that weight." She sighed; her nervous fingers tearing apart the cattail. "I deliver babies every week, and the mothers are barely more than little girls themselves." She looked at her friends through teary eyes. "I am forty-six-years-old, for Christ's sake. My kids are almost ready to start college, and I have to think about starting over." The plant lay in shreds by her feet, its brown head ripped from its slender reed body, the fluffy, white insides blowing away with the breeze.

"What are you going to do?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know," Liz answered.

"Whatever you decide," Diane said, "we'll be there for you. You know that, don't you?"

Liz nodded her head, unable to speak.

"Hey, Diane," Sarah said to break the tension. "Earlier, in the car, you never told us what makes you go back home every year."

Diane deepened her voice and made it sultry. "I go home for the sex," she said.

Sarah laughed and said, "Diane goes home to get some dick." Liz and Diane parroted Sarah, laughing at her. "What's so funny?" she asked. "Don't laugh at me, you guys. That's what I call it, a dick. I suppose Mrs. Healthcare Professional here calls it a penis."

"Actually," Liz laughed, "I call it a cock. How nasty is that?"

"That is nasty," Diane said, "but check this out. Steve calls it Stanley." "Stanley!"

They laughed until they cried and couldn't catch their breath, teasing Diane about seeking treatment for Stanley addiction.

"I am addicted," she laughed. "That's why I was late today. I had to get my fix of Steve and Stanley before we left."

"Now don't go blaming Stanley," Liz said. "You're late for everything."

Sarah teased her with a prediction: "You're going to be late for your own funeral."

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We arrive back in town and pull in front of her home an hour after sunrise. She is everywhere: in the gardens she designed, her car in the driveway, the colonial house she painted peach, and in the faces of the two boys opening the front door. Our misery is dull from exhaustion, but the anguish waits for us; I can feel it. Just when we think we're starting to mend, we'll see a painting of hers in the library or a lone goose fly overhead, and the grief will grab hold and bite our hearts, taking a small piece of us back for a while

longer. How long will it take to feel whole again? Liz reaches for the car door, and I send her a silent, psychic message. Who's the fruitcake now? I hope if her baby is a girl, she'll name her Diane. I pull Liz back and say, "Help me carry her home." She presses the bowl of ashes close to her chest as we get out of the car, and together we walk up the steps towards Diane's waiting family.